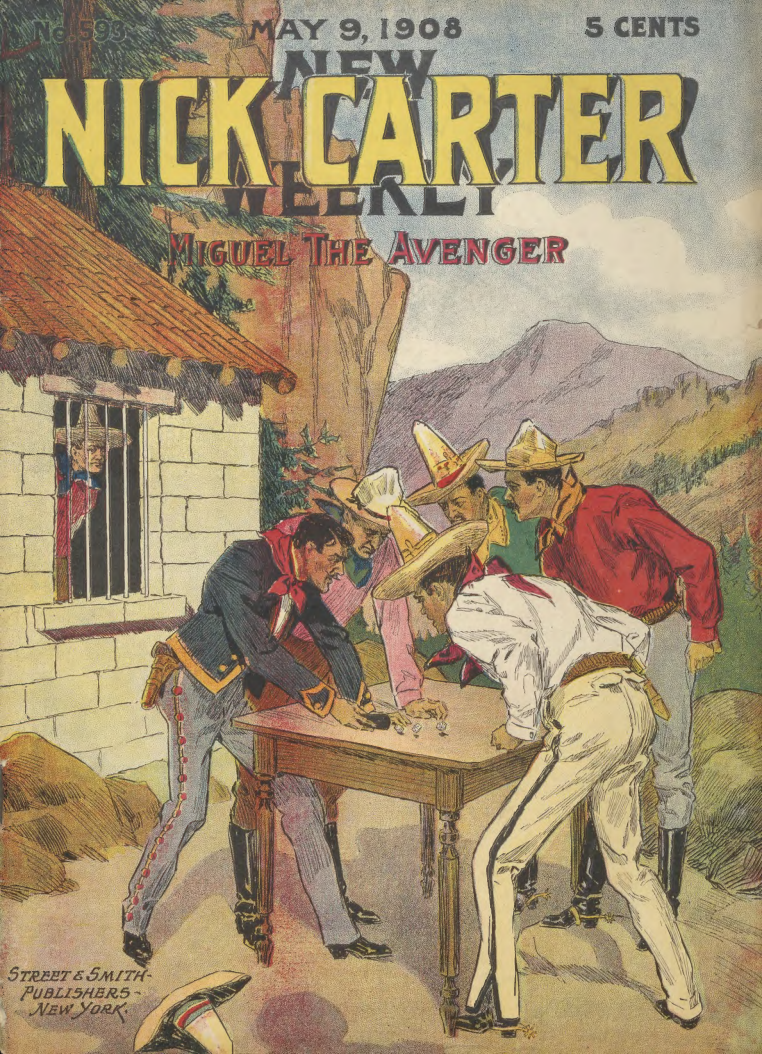
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NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

MIGUEL THE AVENGER



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NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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MIGUEL, THE AVENGER;

OR,

NICK CARTER AMONG THE MEXICAN BANDITS.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

THE DESCENT OF THE BANDITS.

A piercing scream roused Nick Carter to a sense of his surroundings. He had been absorbed in the reading of a book that interested him, and for the moment oblivious to his surroundings, but the scream brought him to his feet on the instant.

He cast the book from him and took a flying leap through the open window to the lawn; and then as he started forward toward the croquet-players, he was greeted by a sight that almost made him pause.

Mr. Joseph Chittenden, the father of the young lady who had given the warning by screaming, was at that instant disappearing over the top of the high wall that surrounded the extensive grounds of "La Felicidad," the same being the name of the beautiful home of Señora Del Puente, in the village of Coyocan, a few miles out from the City of Mexico.

Even as the detective dashed forward to the rescue, the man disappeared utterly from view, and an instant later, before the detective had even reached the wall, he heard a derisive shout from the roadway beyond it, and that was followed by the sound of galloping hoofbeats as several horses—he could not determine how many—dashed away through the gathering gloom.

It all happened so quickly and so utterly without warning that those who had witnessed it were more or less paralyzed by the incident, but Nick, as he ran cried out to one of the party in the garden:

"Here, Hal! Quick! Give me a shoulder!"

Hal Chittenden, the son of the man who had been so strangely wrested from their presence, understood instantly what was wanted.

He ran to the wall and stood with his back to it, while Nick Carter ran forward and, stepping upon Hal's hand, leaped from it to his shoulders, and from there managed to grasp the projecting limb of a tree that grew near the wall.

In another instant he was atop of it, and then he, too, disappeared, for he took a flying leap into the roadway beyond.

That wall, be it said, was ten feet in height, and made wider at the top than at the bottom; it was, therefore, not easily scalable.

Although two minutes could not have elapsed between the disappearance of Mr. Chittenden and the instant when Nick Carter sprang into the roadway outside the

wall, he discovered, when he alighted, that there was no sign whatever of the men who had made the daring attack which had ended in carrying Joseph Chittenden away bodily.

And there was no way for the detective to take up an immediate pursuit.

There was no horse, not even a human being in sight anywhere. He stood in a roadway midway between two high walls, each ten feet in height, one surrounding the grounds from which he had come, the other enclosing other grounds of the same character, around another mansion not unlike Señora Del Puente's. He could not take up the pursuit for the reason that he had no means of doing so, and he reflected bitterly that many minutes must elapse before horses could be brought from the stables.

Moreover, darkness was at hand.

There is no twilight in that country, there being no clouds to reflect the last rays of the sun over the land. It seems incredible to us who live in the north, and near the level of the sea, but there, on the tablelands of Mexico, a cloudy day is almost unknown.

The party engaged at croquet, which included Mr. Chittenden, with his son Hal and his daughter Rose, and Señora Del Puente, were just making the last strokes of their game when the attack was made which had ended so disastrously; and Nick, with his book, had drawn closer to the window near which he had been reading, in order to be able to see the closing words of the chapter he was finishing.

Perceiving that there was not the slightest use in remaining where he was, or in following after the escaping men on foot, Nick called out across the wall:

"Hello, Hal!"

"Yes, Mr. Carter?"

"Run to the stables and tell Primitivo to saddle three of the señora's best horses—one for each of us, for we shall want him with us. I will go around to the front entrance and join you there. And, Hal!"

"Yes?"

"There is no need for unnecessary haste. The men have made good their escape for the present. We will have to trail them. Ask Rose and the señora to meet me at the front door."

"All right, Mr. Carter."

And so the detective passed around to the front of the house while Hal Chittenden hurried away to carry out the directions that had been given him.

Nick found Rose and the señora outwardly calm, although both were pale and greatly startled by what had happened. He addressed himself to the señora.

"Please tell me exactly what happened," he said.

"I hardly know myself," she replied. "Mr. Chittenden was 'rover' in the game. He had sent his ball the length of the grounds, and it was over there near the wall, close to the tree where you got over. When it came his turn to play, he went to get it, and was leaning forward to take aim with his mallet when I saw Miguel——"

"Miguel? Miguel Hernandez? The former administrador of your hacienda in Michoacan?"

"Yes. It was Miguel. I recognized him instantly. Why not? I have known him all my life—ever since I can remember he has served my family."

"Go on, please."

"I saw Miguel step out from among the foliage of the tree where it tops the wall, and where he had evidently been concealed until that instant."

"Yes; go on."

"His riata was coiled in his hand, and, as he stepped forward, he dropped the loop of it fairly over Joseph's head and jerked it tight. As he did so, two other men appeared beside him, and together they pulled Mr. Chittenden to the top of the wall, flung him over it out of sight, and leaped after him. I think Rose saw them at the same instant I did, for she screamed at that time."

"Yes," said Rose. "I saw it all, just as you have described it, señora; and I also recognized Miguel."

"Evidently," mused Nick aloud, "they knew that it was your habit to pass the last hours of daylight in playing croquet there in the garden. They made their plans accordingly, señora."

"Mr. Carter, Miguel is familiar with every habit I have. He was in the service of my father, at home in Madrid, before I was born. He has been a faithful servant all his life, and devoted to me until his zeal overstepped itself and he sought to wreak vengeance upon Mr. Chittenden for the wrong he believed Joseph had done me thirty-three years ago."*

Nick nodded.

"Poor old Miguel," continued the señora. "He is an outcast now, but he brought it upon himself. Nevertheless, I have no doubt that he attributes all his misfortunes to Mr. Chittenden. That is why he has captured and carried him away. And, Mr. Carter, I beseech you, lose no time in going to the rescue, for Miguel will not spare where he hates."

It was at that instant that Hal Chittenden, accompanied by Primitivo and three horses, appeared before the door, and Nick, already dressed for the saddle, for he had been riding that afternoon, had only to seize a cap and hasten toward them.

"One moment, Mr. Carter," the señora called after him, and she followed him part way down the walk toward the gate. "Can you trust your man Primitivo?" she asked, in a low tone. "He only came to you yesterday, you know, and I was wondering——"

The detective interrupted her.

"I know of no man on earth to whom I would trust my

*See NICK CARTER WEEKLY, No. 592.

life and all that I possess more willingly than to Primitivo?" he said. "Some years ago I saved his life, here in Mexico, and since that time he has considered that it belongs to me. Whenever I come to Mexico, he serves me. And moreover, señora, Primitivo is a Guarreran. He was once a bandit chief as his father and grandfather before him were also bandit chiefs. He knows every inch of the country from Jalisco to Tehuantepec, and from the Pacific to the gulf. In all Mexico I could not find such another as Primitivo."

"Thank you," replied the señora. "I am glad you told me. Now go."

"Rose!" called Hal Chittenden to his sister; and she ran forward to hear what he had to say.

"What is it, Hal?" she asked.

"Jack Douglas will be out to see you this evening. Tell him what has happened, and that we are sorry he was not here to take the trail with us."

"And tell him also," said the detective, "to go to my friend the chief of police in Mexico City and tell him to ask the chief to be good enough to telegraph to Captain Sanches of the Rurales, at Morelia, about this affair. If Miguel has gathered much of a following around him, he has recruited most of them near Morelia, I have no doubt. Sanches may know something about it, or be able to find out something about it. At the first opportunity I will communicate with him by telegraph, or telephone, or letter."

"I will," she replied. "And, Mr. Carter!"

"Yes."

"You have no idea, of course, when you will return?"

"Only this much: We won't return until we bring your father back with us. You may depend upon that."

"Heaven bless you, Mr. Carter."

"Good night, Rose. Señora, *adios.*"

They spurred their horses forward then, and in a moment more passed around the corner between the two high walls where Nick had leaped over when Joseph Chittenden was carried off.

Primitivo, who had sat like a graven image on his horse while the recorded conversation was taking place, now seemed suddenly to come to life, and, as they passed out of sight from the two women who were watching them, he said to Nick, in Spanish:

"If you will trust to me, señor, we need not bother to pick up the trail now. I know exactly where they will go for the first ten miles of their flight."

"Lead on, Primitivo," replied Nick. "That is what you are here for, to guide us. We will follow, for I have perfect faith in you, my friend."

"There is only one road they can take for the first ten miles in order to escape. After that there are several, but we will not be long in discovering which one they have selected. They cannot escape me very long. I will find them, señor. Trust Primitivo for that."

"I do—absolutely."

"Thank you, señor."

After that they rode on in silence.

CHAPTER II.

THE PASS THROUGH THE MOUNTAINS.

The first ten miles, to which Primitivo had referred, were covered in a surprisingly short time, for the horses they bestrode were among the best in all Mexico. Arabian stock crossed with what is known as the "Mexican horse," and the get is hardy, tough, fleet, tireless. No such horses can be found anywhere else in the world, not even in Arabia.

There was no moon to amount to anything that night, but the starlight was wondrously bright, and as soon as their eyes were accustomed to the half-light they could see with considerable distinctness.

At the end of the ten miles Primitivo stopped his horse and sprang down; and then he began darting hither and thither, searching the ground with eyes that seemed to see as well in the dark as in the light.

He went in one direction, and then in another, finally passing out of sight altogether; but presently he returned and threw himself into the saddle again with the remark:

"*Adelante, señors!*"—which means "Forward, sirs."

Again they dashed away apparently without a thought of the trail they were pursuing, and again their horses were put to their best speed.

And so another ten miles was covered, with scarcely a word uttered between them; and at the end of it Primitivo repeated his conduct of the first halt they had made, darting hither and yon, and studying the ground and the trail with minutest care; and Nick Carter was perfectly content to leave the matter entirely in his hands, knowing full well that there was no better trailer in that part of the world than Primitivo de Soto, ex-bandit.

They had entered, long since, a mass of foot-hills—or, rather, they had gone in among the mountains which surround the valley of Mexico; and now their way became rugged and wild, and the trail they followed was more and more difficult with every mile they covered.

And finally Primitivo came to a halt, and dismounted.

Beside them on either hand towered high mountains; before them, through the starlight, mountain upon mountain rose one above another, with here and there a pass between two of them, and Nick knew that it would not be long before they would begin to descend the slope if they followed any of the passes, although the mountains seemed higher and more defiant of their approach than ever.

"We must rest here an hour," said Primitivo.

"And why?" demanded Hal impatiently.

"For the sake of our horses, señor," replied Primitivo. "We have come twenty miles and more in a little more than two hours, and over trails where most horses would consume twice that length of time. Besides, I must again search for their trail."

"You do not know which way they have gone from here, Primitivo?" asked Nick.

"No, señor, and it will be difficult to determine in this light."

"Not for you, my friend," said the detective.

Primitivo shrugged his shoulders. Then he replied:

"For me, as well as for another, señor. The trail is a rocky one now for a considerable distance, no matter which one of three they took. I will try and see if I can determine which. But we may have to wait here till daylight. There is a spring yonder, behind those boulders. If you will water the horses while I search the trail——"

He did not complete the sentence, but was gone at once.

After watering the horses, and searching for and finding a spot where some grass grew upon which the animals could browse, Nick and Hal seated themselves to await the return of Primitivo.

It was an hour before he appeared, tireless, indefatigable, insistent. He was one man in ten thousand, Nick Carter whispered to Hal.

"Well, Primitivo?" he asked, as the latter dropped down upon a rock near them and began the manufacture of a corn-husk cigarette.

"It is useless, señor," was the reply. "I think I know which way they have gone, but I am not sure. We must wait for more light."

"But surely we have gained upon them. They cannot be far ahead of us now."

"No; they cannot be far ahead of us, señor. If it were possible to follow at once, we might even overtake them before daylight. I doubt if they are a mile ahead of us at the present moment."

"Couldn't we take a chance, Primitivo?"

The Guerreran shrugged his shoulders expressively.

"It would be a chance, señor," he said, "and it might be a mistaken one."

"You think it best to wait here?"

"Yes."

"And in the meantime," said Hal, "they will get far in advance of us again."

"No, señor," replied Primitivo. "Their horses are more tired than ours; unless——"

"Unless what?"

"Unless they had fresh horses awaiting them somewhere near here—and it is more than likely that they had. By the time we have covered another twenty miles I will be able to determine, I think, where they are going. That is, whether they are heading for Michoacan or for my native state of Guerrero."

"You know every one of these trails, do you not, Primitivo?" asked Hal.

"As well, señor, as you know the way in the dark to your own lips with a glass of wine."

"You think it a better plan to wait here for daylight than to push on, do you?"

"I do, señor. And if you and Señor Carter will accept my advice, you will wrap those serapes around you and get some sleep. It will be light enough for us to continue on our way by four in the morning."

They took his advice, it being good, and with the result that both were soon soundly sleeping, for the long, hard ride through the night had brought about a condition of fatigue that was conducive to slumber.

Nick started up, wide-awake, a little before daylight, feeling the hand of Primitivo upon his shoulder.

"Come," said the latter. "I have found the trail, and the horses are rested."

Within five minutes they were in the saddle again and pushing on; and their way led them along a narrow mountain-pass where the path was scarcely wider than two feet, and where the gulf beneath them seemed bottomless.

"It is the trail I thought they had taken," said Primitivo, speaking back over his shoulder; "but I was not certain. It is a short cut through this spur of the mountains, and it is the route to Michoacan—to Morelia, in fact."

"Then it is evident that Miguel is making for the mountains near the hacienda that belongs to Señora Del Puente—the Hacienda del Montanas."

"Yes, señor."

"As soon as we are certain of that, Primitivo——"

"As soon as we are certain of it, señor, we will not bother to follow their trail, but will strike across by a shorter cut I know. It may be that we can get there in advance of them."

"Are they far ahead of us, Primitivo, do you think?"

"Yes, señor. They have received fresh horses. Back there, before we entered upon the narrow part of this ledge, there were horses awaiting them. They took the fresh ones and left the others in charge of one man, who took them away in another direction. It was part of the plans they made."

"I don't suppose there is any place for breakfast around here, is there?" asked Hal, a little later, when they came to a wider part of the trail so that he could ride up alongside of Nick Carter.

"Hardly," smiled the detective. "I begin to feel a little bit hungry myself, Hal."

Primitivo heard them and pulled in his horse for a moment.

Then he slung around in front of him a pouch that he

had been carrying at his side, and he took from it a number of thick, heavy, waxy-looking leaves, and gave several of them to the detective, and to Hal.

"Chew those," he said. "A little at a time. Chew them to a pulp—until you have extracted all the good from them, and your hunger will be relieved."

"What are they?" asked Hal wonderingly.

"Cocoa-leaves, señor. They are more nutritious than beefsteaks; more sustaining. I have traveled for weeks at a time through the mountains, with no other food than such leaves."

He rode on then, while the detective and Hal fell to chewing the leaves; and much to the astonishment of the latter, his hunger presently disappeared, and he felt bright and strong, as if he had had his breakfast and a bath, and a good night's rest to boot.

It was not the detective's first experience with cocoa-leaves, however. He knew that a Mexican runner will travel hundreds of miles across the mountains on foot without rest, and with only the leaves of the cocoa-plant to nourish him.

"I brought a supply of them with me," said Primitivo, a moment later, "as soon as I knew that we had to ride through the mountains."

"Do you know this old Miguel, whom we are pursuing, Primitivo?" asked the detective.

"*Si, señor.* I know him," was the grim reply. "He is a Spaniard. He was administrador at the Hacienda Del Montanas for the señora."

"That is true."

"And now, since he abducted this young caballero and his sister, and so incensed his mistress against him, he has fled to the mountains and become a bandit."*

"How did you know all that, Primitivo?" asked Nick, smiling.

"An acquaintance of mine has joined his company. They came to me to ask me to join with them, but I told them that such days were past, and that it was only the *tiera gracia* that awaited them, if they followed that profession now."

"Nothing doing, eh, in the bandit line, these days?" laughed Hal.

"No, señor."

"And they really sent for you to join in with them?" asked the detective, interested.

"Yes, señor."

"It was your 'friend' who came to you, I suppose. The one to whom you referred just now?"

"Yes, señor."

"Did he not tell you where they intended to make their headquarters?"

"No, señor. He would have been a fool to tell me that before he knew whether I would join in with them or not; but I think I know what part of the country they will infest, for all of that."

"The mountains near Morelia, eh, Primitivo?"

"Yes, señor—until they are caught,"

Hal pushed forward again.

"Do you think, Primitivo, that my father is in any immediate danger?" he asked.

"Any man in the power of a wolf like old Miguel would be in danger, señor," was the reply. "He will not be safe a moment."

"Perhaps he intends only to hold my father for ransom."

"Perhaps."

"You think differently?"

"I have heard the story of his hate for your father, señor. I am of the opinion that he has stolen your father away for vengeance rather than for a ransom. Miguel is a Spaniard."

"And you haven't any use for Spaniards, I see, Primitivo. Eh?"

"None whatever. Now we can ride faster, if you will follow me, señors."

He started his horse forward then, and they were soon again galloping at full speed along the pass through the mountains.

*See NICK CARTER WEEKLY, No. 592.

CHAPTER III.

PRIMITIVO, THE EX-BANDIT.

They traveled steadily until noon, and then, as their horses showed signs of great fatigue, they stopped for rest; but after an hour they plodded on again, for Primitivo had said to them:

"In two hours we will arrive at the place where lives a friend of mine who will provide us with fresh horses. We will have to turn off the trail a little way to get them, but it will be worth it. We will not overtake the men we are pursuing now until they arrive at their destination—wherever that may be. I did not suppose that Miguel knew these mountain-passes so well."

"Possibly he has got your 'friend' to guide him," suggested Nick.

"It is more than likely, señor."

With a change of horses, procured as Primitivo had stated, they were quickly on their way again, although Hal Chittenden was beginning to show signs of great weariness, and even the detective confessed to himself that the trip was fatiguing.

But Primitivo seemed made of iron. Not once did he show the least sign that he was tired.

That night they stopped at a hacienda, although they were obliged to go several miles off the trail in order to do so; but it was necessary that they should rest; and they ate their dinners and slept in beds that night.

Daylight saw them on their way again, and all that day they plodded on tirelessly until about four o'clock in the afternoon, when, from the summit of a pass they were traversing, Primitivo pointed away ahead of them to where could be seen white buildings that glistened in the sunlight, and among them the domes and steeples of many churches.

"Morelia," he said simply.

Then he waved his hand toward the right, which was north, and added:

"Yonder, not far from where we are now, is the Hacienda del Montanas; and yonder"—he indicated the northwest—"is the direction which we must follow if we would find old Miguel."

"You think he has a hiding-place somewhere among those mountains to the northwest of the hacienda?" asked Nick.

"Yes, señor, and I think I know where it is."

"Tell me."

"I think so for the reason that it is the best place in all these mountains, for his rendezvous—for his headquarters; for his place to recruit his men and get them together."

"You know the place?"

"I know it well. I spent four years there, with my father, when I was a boy."

"Then you know all its secrets?"

"Every one, señor."

They were riding considerably in advance of Hal at the time, and now the detective asked:

"Tell me, Primitivo, what is your opinion concerning what will be done with the captive."

"I think, señor, if Miguel has his way, Mr. Chittenden will be murdered at once. But there is a chance that he may not be permitted to have his way."

"But if Miguel intends to murder the man, why did he not do it at once, instead of bringing him all this distance into the mountains first?"

"Because he may be fearful lest his associates would object."

"Ah; I see."

"In inducing them to go with him to make his capture, he had to agree to bring the prisoner back with him."

"But don't you suppose he is the chief of the outfit?"

"I know that he is—for the present. But sometimes a command becomes too strong for the man who is in control; and in such a case, another chief is chosen. If Miguel killed his victim without the consent of his followers, he would lose prestige—it might be, his life."

"I always supposed a bandit chief to be absolute in his authority."

"So he is, señor, when once he has established it. But this is a new organization. A chief to be a chief, must be tried out. He must prove himself a better man than all the others. He must be fearless, and strong—and quick. Such men would not follow a chief, else."

"But Miguel has organized this band."

"True; and if he is capable, he will remain in command of it. If not, he will have to take a second place, and another will be chosen."

"You think, then, that there is hope that Mr. Chittenden may be spared?"

"If the other members of the company are informed of his wealth, I do. If Miguel has succeeded in convincing them that the señor is a poor man, they will kill him readily to get rid of him."

"But they must know it is a case of private revenge on the part of Miguel."

"Doubtless. That is why they consented to go with him to Coyocan to make the capture. But if they have also learned that the señor is a very rich man, they will insist upon holding him for ransom, and, while they may consent to torture him, they will not kill him."

"How do you mean—torture him?"

"Usually, señor, when ransom is demanded for a prisoner, a letter is sent demanding the price of ransom, and intimating that if the amount is not forthcoming by a certain date, the price will be increased, and one of the prisoner's ears, or his nose, or a couple of his fingers will be sent by way of argument—and as a suggestion of haste."

"Yes. I have heard of such things."

"Well, señor, at the instigation of Miguel, it is possible that an ear or some other part of the señor's body may be sent with the first letter. That is what I meant by torture."

"Do you think it likely?"

"I think it possible."

"Would this 'friend' of yours to whom you have referred consent to such a thing?"

"Readily, I think. It would do him no good to oppose it, even were he so inclined."

"Why not?"

"Because he would be overruled by the majority; and on all such questions, among bandits, the majority is absolute, señor."

The detective was silent, and Primitivo continued:

"In this case, the cutting off of an ear, or the nose, would be in the nature of a compromise with the chief."

"I suppose so."

"If Miguel demanded his death, and the others demanded that he be admitted to ransom, it would be suggested that both sides to the question might be satisfied by some such compromise."

"Did you resort to such cruelties when you were a bandit, Primitivo?"

"No; and my father never permitted them, although I am ashamed to say that my grandfather did. But my father was a wonderful man, señor. He was absolute in

his authority, and no man who served under him ever dared to question it."

"That was in Guerrero?"

"No; for the most part, right around here, near Morelia; and between here and the City of Mexico. But you must remember that it was before the railroads were built. Twenty-five years ago there was only one railroad in Mexico—from the City of Mexico to Vera Cruz. Twenty years ago there were only two. All the others have been built since that time."

"It was President Diaz who stopped the bandit-business, wasn't it?"

"Yes, señor. The first Rurales were made up of pardoned bandits. That was why they were so feared. It was they who kept President Diaz in his chair when Gonzales and others would have wrested the presidency from him."

"Tell me more about this retreat in the mountains to which you have decided to lead us."

"It is a freak of nature, señor, and you might ride all around it, for days and weeks, in search of it, and, although you would never be more than a mile away from it, you could not find it."

"Tell me about it."

"It is a cup in the middle of a mountain; a place that the Almighty scooped out as with a mason's trowel, leaving a valley at the bottom that is a mile wide and two miles long, and which has two entrances."

"Two entrances?"

"Yes; from opposite sides of the place. They are—that is, their beginnings are—many leagues apart; and each is equally impossible to find, unless one has been shown the way."

"But you know the way to both, eh?"

"As well as you know your right hand from your left, señor. The entrances, where they begin, are but narrow fissures through the mountains, where streams of water run, and therefore there is no trail. But you will see for yourself, for I will show you, señor."

"Primitivo, have you any idea at all how many men we will find there in that mountain retreat?"

"But little more than you have; but I should say, perhaps, a score."

"So many as that?"

"It was the idea given me by the friend I have referred to."

"That will be rather heavy odds, won't it, three against a score?"

"Since we are only three, there is no other way. And besides——"

"Well?"

"I remember what you said to the señorita as we were starting; about telegraphing to el capitan Sanches."

"What of that?"

"If after we have entered the Plaza Abajo—that is what the place is called, señor—if after we have entered it and looked around us, we find that the señor who is a prisoner is in no immediate danger, and that it will be necessary to have a superior force in order to rescue him, one of us will go to Morelia for assistance; but I do not think it will be necessary."

"No? Why?"

"I believe that we can accomplish by strategy what would otherwise be done by force."

"Good. So do I."

"It is because I know so well the secrets of the Plaza Abajo that I believe it. I know things about the place that even those men who are there now do not know."

"And those secrets will be of assistance to us?"

"Yes, señor. Decidedly so."

"Will there be no difficulty in getting into the place without discovery?"

"There is where the difficulty will lie, señor. That will be the only serious part of our journey, for, if Miguel and his followers are at all wise, they will have sentinels posted at the old places, to warn them of the approach of strangers."

"And those sentinels will discover us?"

"They cannot fail to do so."

"Then you have a plan to offset that discovery, eh? I see it in your eyes."

"Yes, señor."

"What is it?"

"I have already been asked to join with the bandits. I declined. I can say that I have changed my mind, and go in among them."

"But suppose old Miguel should happen to know that you have entered my employ? That you were at Coyocan when he made his raid? What then?"

"In that case, señor, they would kill me," was the calm reply.

CHAPTER IV.

A PERILOUS PASSAGE.

It was nearly six o'clock when Primitivo, after having turned off the regular trail and led the way for almost a mile through a narrow ravine, stopped his horse and dismounted, signifying to the others that they were to do the same.

"We will leave our horses here, señors," he said, "and we will not fasten them. There is food and water for them in plenty here, and they will not leave the place, while, on the other hand, if we should not return, they will not suffer because of it."

"What do you mean by saying if we should not return?" asked Hal, rather startled.

"We are going into danger, señor," was the calm reply. "It may be that we will not return here. Many men who

have come to these mountains have left their bones here."

"You're a cheerful sort of a chap, Primitivo," said Hal, laughing uneasily. "For one, I prefer to take my bones away with me."

Primitivo rolled himself a corn-husk cigarette and seated himself to smoke it.

"It is best that we remain here until dark," he said quietly. "In the beginning I thought I would leave you here, señors, and go forward alone, pretending that I wished to join the bandits, but I have decided since that it would be foolish. They would know that I was not in earnest, and they would only kill me; besides, they would know because of my presence that there were others with me."

"So you have decided not to give up the ghost, eh?" smiled Hal. "Really, Primitivo, you are by all odds the most remarkable chap I ever knew. You talk about being killed as if it were a pleasant pastime."

"I carried my life on my sleeve forty years, señor. During twenty of those years there was a price on my head, dead or alive. Such experiences accustom one to the thought of death."

"I should suppose it might. You seem to have taken rather good care of yours, though."

"It was because I was quicker than others, possibly. Are you a brave man, Señor Chittenden, may I ask?"

"Gee! I don't know. I never had an opportunity to test the question. I might flunk, you know, in a particularly tight place—but I'd try not to do so."

Primitivo smiled.

"It is a good answer, and a sufficient one," he said. "But I have known men who would face any danger that could be met on level ground, who were yet afraid of their lives if they were taken to some dizzy height, and compelled to look down into a gulf where they would fall if they lost their hold."

"Oh, I don't in the least mind dizzy heights, if that is what you mean."

"It is what I mean—in the dark, too."

"I won't flunk at that. What is it?"

"There are doubtless sentinels posted along the route we would travel if we went directly to the Plaza Abajo from here. In order to avoid them, we must go around."

"Yes?"

"And in order to get around them without being discovered, we must go through a cavern that I know about, and after that we must pass along the bare face of a cliff like flies, where there is very little to cling to, and nothing to grasp if you lose your hold."

"I'll chance it, if you lead the way and show me or tell me what to do."

"Well spoken."

"Why don't you ask Mr. Carter about it?"

"Because I know the señor. But if you thought there was any danger of your losing your head, I should suggest that you remain here, Señor Chittenden——"

"Well, I guess not! Not much! I'll be a human fly, if that is what you want. I suppose there is some sort of foothold, isn't there?"

"Yes; but very little; and at first there is a sheer fall of a thousand feet beneath us, if you lose your hold. It grows less, of course, as we descend."

"Naturally."

"And the way where it is perilous is not long. After that it will be easy."

"Is there any danger that we will be seen from below?" asked Nick.

"None whatever; not even in daylight. The way is screened from below. It is a passageway that my father created, with the assistance of what Nature had done in advance. He used it once to get out of the valley, when it would have been death for him to remain there or to have attempted to pass out by either of the regular ways. Come. If you are both ready we will go now."

Primitivo led the way and the others followed, and for a considerable distance they walked along naturally; but the moment came when he dropped upon his hands and knees, and then on his belly, and wormed himself along like a snake, making a signal for silence and caution before he did so.

After thirty rods or more covered in this manner, he rose again to his feet, and hurried onward with less caution, approaching what appeared to be an impassable height that was covered with stunted trees and boulders.

For a distance he led the way up the sheer side of the mountain, and it was a difficult climb; but at last they came out on a level ledge, along which he hurried, and then suddenly turned aside and, dropping flat again, forced his way through a hole in the rock that was barely large enough to admit his body.

It seemed forbidding enough, but Nick, who was next to him, followed at once, and he could hear Hal coming along behind, having rather more difficulty than his companions, by reason of the fact that his body was so much larger.

But the cavern grew larger as they advanced, and, after covering rather more than a hundred feet, the voice of Primitivo assured them that they could stand upright, if they liked.

The darkness of the place was absolutely impenetrable, and Hal remarked:

"I hope there are no holes to step into in this place, Primitivo."

"No. There are none. If you will wrap your right hand in your handkerchief so it will not be torn by the rocks, and then keep it in touch with the wall on your right, you will get along all right. The footing is smooth and even."

Nick figured that the cavern was at least a quarter of

a mile long; but at last they saw a spot of light ahead of them, and a moment later they stepped out upon a broad ledge at the mouth of the gallery, and there was a view spread open before them which Nick Carter will never forget as long as he lives.

The new moon, not yet large enough to afford much light, seemed, since the utter darkness through which they had passed, to shine with remarkable brilliancy; and the stars glowed like so many electric lights in the sky. Together they lighted up the valley that stretched away a thousand feet below them wondrously.

Across the valley, on every hand, towered other mountains, faced by tall and smooth cliffs like those on this side. Below them they could see the flicker of fires, and they knew that men were there—the men of whom they were in search.

"Here is the difficult place," said Primitivo.

But that was all he said, and he stepped forward at once and passed outside the cavern upon the ledge, and then, turning with his face to the cliff, he raised his hands over his head and pressed his fingers into niches in the rocks that had evidently been cut there by the hand of man for that very purpose.

Under his feet there was the narrowest possible foothold.

It was only wide enough, Nick discovered when he followed Primitivo, to receive the tips of his toes—and there was no way in which he could look down to discover where he was to place his feet as he moved along the face of the cliff.

And so they edged along, sidestepping and clinging with the ends of their fingers, to the notches cut in the rock.

And these notches, or holes, were perhaps a foot or eighteen inches apart; just the distance that one could sidestep with ease.

It was a perilous way, indeed, with a clear fall of more than a thousand feet directly beneath them, and it was perhaps fortunate for Hal Chittenden that he could not look down if he tried to do so.

In reality, he strove to make himself believe that there was only a slight fall beneath him; he tried to convince his own mind that there was no danger at all, and he so far succeeded in this endeavor that, before he realized it, they were across the bad place, and the voice of Primitivo announced:

"There is two feet of space on the ledge behind you now, Señor Chittenden, so you need not cling to the rock any longer. It grows wider as we advance. We are past the dangerous spot now. The rest is easy."

"Easy!" thought Hal, as he looked around him. For an instant his head swam, and then he controlled himself, and followed along after the others, but he kept his eyes resolutely turned away from the gulf below him, and fixed them upon the rocks above.

And the way did grow broader; moreover, it presently began to descend, and at last they came into a winding pathway that led down the cliff, zigzagging in its descent.

But now there were stunted trees along their route; now, also, through the trees they could frequently see quite plainly the glimmer of the fires that burned in the valley where they were going.

And at last the moment arrived when they reached the bottom and stepped forward through a dense thicket of bushes and thorns on the level plain of the Plaza Abajo.

"Will you wait here for me while I reconnoiter?" asked Primitivo; "or is it your wish that we keep together? There is very little danger now, unless we are confronted by one of the company. And that is not likely. Probably they are all engaged at cards, or dice. There is never any watch kept here. It is not deemed necessary."

"I should think not," muttered Hal.

"I think we had better keep together," said Nick in reply to Primitivo's question. "What are those buildings yonder?"

"They are stone houses that were built by order of my father," was the reply. "In the large one he lived when he was here. That farthest one is a storehouse, where the supplies were once kept. The one to the right, used to be the prison where captives were detained. We called it Belem, after the prison in Mexico."

"And that is doubtless where Mr. Chittenden is confined now, don't you think?"

"Very likely."

"Would there be a guard over him, do you think, Primitivo?"

"It is not likely. It would not be necessary. He could not escape. Even if he got out of the prison house, he could not leave the valley."

"Then wouldn't it be a good idea to get him out of there, and take him out of the valley by the way we entered it?"

"It might. I was thinking of that. But do you suppose that he, as large and heavy as he is, could walk the face of the cliff?"

The detective shook his head.

"I doubt it," he said. "What do you think, Hal?"

"He'd have pluck enough to try it, but I would be afraid for his life. Frankly, I don't believe he could do it."

"Anyhow," said the detective, "we will find out if he is there. We mustn't count our chickens before they are hatched."

"Come," said Primitivo; and he glided forward.

CHAPTER V.

BRAVO! EULALIA!

"Wait," said the detective as they were about to start toward the prison house. "I think before we make that effort, I will do a little reconnoitering. Hal, you wait here with Primitivo."

"And I, señor?" asked the Guerreran. "Pardon me, but would it not be better for me to do the scouting for you, since I know my way around so well?"

"No, my friend. It is precisely because I do not know it that I wish to find out about it. It has never been to my liking to work very much in the dark, so far as being familiar with my surroundings is concerned. Wait here, both of you. I won't be long."

He glided away then into the shadow, and turned toward a shedlike structure before which the brightest of the fires was burning, and around which he could see that a number of men were gathered.

The detective himself was wearing a *charro* costume—the one he had used in riding the afternoon of his departure from Coyocan; and on his head he had placed Primitivo's sombrero at the last instant before leaving him, so in appearance he was not dissimilar to the men who belonged at the place, if one should chance to see him, save that perhaps his dress was richer and better.

He kept in the shadow of the buildings as much as possible as he moved forward, and presently was pleased to discover that he had succeeded in approaching near enough so that he could not only see the faces of the men around the fire, but he could quite plainly hear the words they uttered.

For a moment he paid no attention to what they were saying, but busied himself in studying their hard faces; all the time he was searching for the visage of old Miguel.

It was nowhere to be seen, however, and then, just as he decided that he would have to look elsewhere for the bandit chief, he overheard a remark that astonished him.

Translated, it was as follows:

"Miguel should be here by now with the second party; eh, Pancho?"

"He should have been here before dark, if he met them as he hoped to do, and if nothing happened to spoil the plans he made," was the rather surly reply.

"And the old Englishman—he is rich, no?"

"As rich as an old Spanish mine."

"And the young woman—she is beautiful?"

"As beautiful as a dream of heaven, with hair like spun gold, with eyes as blue as the sky at midday, with the figure of a goddess—— Ah!"

"It was a master plot of Miguel's; eh, my Pancho?"

"Yes."

"To have two parties of us with him instead of one; to lead the men away from the house with the first party, when the old man was captured, and then to descend upon it when it had no protectors, and secure the girl. It was great. Old Miguel has a head on him. He is worthy to be our chief; eh?"

"Yes."

"*Caramba!* But it was a hard ride through the mountains to keep ahead of those pursuers. I wonder where we lost them?"

"*Quien sabe*, Sus. But they will never find this place, and if they should, much good it will do them!"

He who was called Sus laughed heartily over some thought that occurred to him. Then he said:

"I was laughing to think what Miguel would do to the members of the second party if they failed to get the girl. Plainly he was anxious, or he would not have gone back on the trail to meet them, so soon after his arrival. The old man is like iron. For myself, I preferred to take it easy and await their arrival here—with a full stomach. Did you hear what the old man said when we dumped him on the floor in our Belem? But I am forgetting. You do not understand the English."

"No; what did he say?"

"He called out: 'I am rich; very rich; I will pay you men well if you will release me and take me back again!' He was almost dead with the ride. I suspect he thought that every bone in his body was broken."

"Doubtless."

"Will Miguel let him redeem himself, do you think, Pancho? He hates him so that sometimes I doubt it."

"He will let him redeem himself—yes. But the girl? No. That is to be his revenge. And, mind you, the old man is not to know that the girl is here. He is not to find out that we made her captive, too, until he has paid his ransom and has returned to Mexico. It is then that he will find it out. That is Miguel's revenge."

"Ah, it is beautiful, isn't it. Miguel knows how to make his enemies suffer. And is it true what you told me about the dice?"

"True? Yes, as true as the gospels;" and the scoundrel crossed himself devoutly, or, rather, superstitiously.

"Tell me again, that I may understand about it."

"It is this way; it was Miguel's own proposal, for he says he is too old to want a wife."

"Yes. Well?"

"The padre from the little church just outside of Morelia is to be brought here blindfolded. He will be told that it is only to perform a marriage ceremony, and then he will be taken back again, so the good man need not be frightened."

"Yes."

"Then those of us who care to enter into the game are to pledge one hundred pesos each for a chance at the dice. Then we are to throw three times each, and he who counts the most for his three throws wins the girl, and the padre will marry them."

"Ah!"—rubbing his hands together. "It is fine, Pancho. And who gets the money that is paid for the chances? Miguel?"

"No. It goes into the general fund."

"And may one purchase as many chances as he likes?"

"No; one chance each. That is all."

"And she is beautiful, you say."

"Beautiful? Ah, you should see her, Sus."

"When will the dice be thrown?"

"Not before the day after to-morrow. Some of us will have to go after the padre to-morrow, and it will take all the day, and perhaps into the night, to get him here. It will not be possible to dice for the girl until the day after."

"And in the meantime—where will she be kept?"

"In the house of Miguel. In the chief's house, with Eulalia. Eulalia will care for her."

"Eulalia—I had forgotten her. What will she say about this dicing for a woman? Will she not object?"

"Who is Eulalia that she should object? It is a legitimate affair. There is to be a priest, and the girl will be safely married to the man who wins her, according to the rites of the church. Who is Eulalia that she should object."

A figure that Nick had not noticed before, since it had been concealed in the shadow of the building, came forward swiftly toward the fire now, and paused, facing the two men who had been discussing the fate of Rose Chittenden, for it could be no other.

Her eyes were flashing and her straight form was drawn up proudly.

"Is it you, Pancho Morales, who asks 'who is Eulalia?'" she demanded calmly, but it was a threatening calm for all that.

The man shrank visibly.

"You have heard what we were saying?" he demanded, with evident fear.

"Yes. Every word."

"For Heaven's sake, Eulalia, do not tell your father that we told you. It was to be kept from you till the last."

"It is no wonder that it was to be kept from me. Do you—does my father suppose that I, Eulalia Montez, will permit such a thing to happen? To dice for a girl, as if she were a dog, or a horse, or a saddle, or a sombrero! Let her be ransomed, or if she must be detained here, let her choose one of you, if she will, for a husband. But to dice for her? No; I will not permit it. Sus was right when he asked the question."

"Perhaps she would not want to choose one of us any more than you do, Eulalia," retorted Pancho.

"Then she can live here as I do, without a husband. Ah, how I hate you all! I was happy there at the hacienda. When my father comes you may tell him that I say she shall not be diced for."

"But how will you prevent it if he insists? He is the chief. We have all sworn to obey his every word."

"I have not if you have. How may I prevent it? I will tell you. Rather than see her compelled to such a fate as that, I would myself drive my knife into her heart. If she were in my place and I in hers, I would thank her to do it for me."

"You're not very complimentary, Eulalia."

She came a step nearer to him and looked him squarely in the eyes in the firelight.

"Pancho," she said, "don't get it into your head that I fear you, or any of you. Don't let your men suppose that I would fear them all were they to attack me. And I tell you now that never while I live shall that girl be diced for. You may tell my father that I said so when he returns."

She paused then and stood for a moment as if to give added weight to her words; then she turned on her heel and strode away through the darkness toward the house that Primitivo had pointed out as being the home of the chief.

But Nick had already overheard enough to inform him as to the exact conditions that existed around him.

He knew now that Hal's father was in the prison house, where he had been cast none too gently upon the earthen floor when he was brought in from his long ride. He knew that old Miguel had taken his departure again, a few minutes later, to meet a second party that had followed him to Coyocan, and whose duty it had been to make a captive of Rose after Hal and himself had been decoyed away by the capture of Mr. Chittenden. He knew that somewhere out there on the mountains that second party was now approaching with Rose as a captive.

He paused for a moment, wondering if he should tell Hal and Primitivo of what he had overheard; and he decided that it was unnecessary to tell them more than that Rose had also been made captive and was being brought there to the valley of the Plaza Abajo.

Having arrived at a determination, he started on again, to rejoin his companions.

The information he had gleaned was depressing. It made their mission there so much the more difficult.

He was thinking upon this, and had taken perhaps a dozen steps forward, keeping in the shadow of the house, when he was brought to a sudden halt by an apparition that seemed to rise out of the ground and confront him.

And the apparition was none other than the girl called Eulalia.

CHAPTER VI.

THE BANDIT CHIEFTAIN'S DAUGHTER.

The detective started back, as well he might, at the suddenness of her appearance, and his impulse was to

leap forward and seize her, and thus, if possible, prevent her from crying out and giving the alarm; for well he knew that his own life and those of his two friends depended upon a very slender thread at that moment.

But she made no sound. She only stood there facing him in the darkness; and instantly it occurred to Nick that she must have seen him and have known that he was near, even before she had her conversation with Pancho.

"If she did not give the alarm then, she will not do so now," was his thought; and he folded his arms across his chest and stood before her, waiting.

Presently, as she did not seem inclined to speak, he broke the silence, and in a low tone that could not possibly penetrate beyond her, he said:

"Are we to be friends, señorita, or foes? Are you to sacrifice my life, and the lives of many of those men whom I will kill before they can kill me?"

"Bah!" she said; and smiled, showing her white and even teeth through the darkness. "It would please me if you could kill them all, señor, and so prevail upon my father to take me away from here. How did you get here?"

"I borrowed the wings of an eagle, señorita, and flew over the tops of the mountains," he replied, returning her smile. And she smiled again at this.

"I can almost believe you," she said. "I saw you there, in the shadow of the house, when I came down to hear what the men were talking about. I suspected something of the kind that we overheard, when I knew that my father had gone away again to meet the other party. Again, how did you get here?"

"I have told you—or nearly so. I climbed down the face of the cliff into the valley."

"But it is impossible."

"Nevertheless, it is true."

"Are you alone?"

"Before I reply to that question, señorita, will you inform me if we are to be friends?"

"We may be friends if you will promise me to save my father from himself, and in spite of himself."

"And your father is Miguel Montez?"

"Yes."

"I will do what I can, but it is asking me much. It seems to me that I am in need of some saving myself at the present moment."

"Listen. You have come here to save the young lady of whom they were talking just now?"

"Yes."

"Is she the same one who was a prisoner at the Hacienda del Montanas?"*

"Yes."

"And is it her father who is now a prisoner here?"

"Yes."

"You are here to save them both, if you can?"

"I am here to save them both, *and* I can," he replied, shutting his lips together.

Eulalia took a step nearer to him and peered into his face closely. Then she gasped.

"I know you now," she said. "You are the same one who came to the hacienda, and rescued the young lady and her brother when they were prisoners of my father there. I saw you."

"Yes. I am the same, señorita."**

"You are Señor Carter."

"Yes."

"You are a brave man to venture here. Are you alone?"

"You have not replied to my question yet, señorita."

"I will be your friend and aid you, if you will in return help me, señor."

"Is that a compact, señorita?"

"Yes; if you will make it so."

"There is my hand upon it. Will you take it?" And Nick stepped forward a little, extending his right hand; and Eulalia placed her own slender palm within it and looked up smilingly into his face.

"We are conspirators now," she said.

"Yes. So it would seem, señorita."

"And I am a traitor."

"No; you are a brave and good young lady, who would stand between another girl like yourself and wrong. You are not a traitor, you are a patriot—Eulalia."

"I like that better than señorita. Indeed, why should I not save her? I could not have those brutes of men throw dice for her."

"Certainly not."

"Are you alone, Señor Carter? Did you come here alone?"

"No; there are two others with me. One of them is the brother of the young lady whom your father is bringing here; the other——"

"That handsome young man?"

"Yes," smiled Nick. "And the other is my guide, a Guerreran named Primitivo."

"Where are they now?"

"Yonder in the shadow of that cluster of bushes;" and he pointed toward them. "They are awaiting my return, and no doubt wondering why I have been gone so long a time."

"What were you going to do now?"

"We were about to force our way into the prison house, to——"

"You must not do that; not now; not if you wish to save the young lady. And besides, I will tell you this: I have already visited the gentleman, loosened his bonds, given him to eat and drink, and provided him with a

*See NICK CARTER WEEKLY 592.

**See NICK CARTER WEEKLY 592.

blanket. He is quite comfortable now, and is, no doubt, sleeping."

"You are an angel of mercy, señorita. Heaven will bless you for your goodness."

"You must be concealed somewhere," she said, not heeding what he had said, for she was evidently in deep thought, with contracted brows; then she turned and pointed toward the chief's house.

"Do you see that building yonder?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Go to your friends; bid them follow you. Then skulk around, making a wide circle, and approach that house from the rear. I will be there to receive you when you arrive. It will be the only place in the valley where you can hide in safety."

"But can we hide in safety there, in the house of the chief, señorita?"

"You can if you follow my directions, and do as I tell you to do."

"We will do that, I promise."

"Then go. Go at once. My father may return at any moment now, and you must be safely hidden before he arrives."

"You will meet us at the rear of the house, you say?"

"Yes. Make haste."

Without another word Nick hurried away, clinging to the shadows that half-concealed him, and mentally praying that, now when all was going so well, he might not be seen.

He found his friends waiting with considerable impatience, and more anxiety; although, as they had heard no sound, they were fairly well satisfied that he had gotten into no trouble.

And then in a few words he told them of his encounter with Eulalia and of what she had promised to do for them.

Much to his surprise, it was Primitivo who demurred; but that was on general principles.

"She is a Spaniard," he said, "and she is the daughter of old Miguel. I would not trust her, señor."

"I would. If you looked into her eyes so would you, even you, Primitivo. And, anyhow, there is nothing else to do now. If we have to fight for it, I fancy we can put up a better defense from the inside of that house than outside. Follow me, now, both of you!"

He carried out the directions given him by the girl, and led his friends by a wide détour around to the rear of the chief's house.

They approached it in a deeper shadow than the surrounding ones, and, as they drew near, the figure of Eulalia stepped out from the doorway and met them.

"Come," she said. "Do not speak until I give you permission."

She led them into the stone house then, and they passed through two rooms, finally entering a third one that was large and square, and utterly bare of furniture.

"Here you will be safe," she said. "My father never enters this room. It is unfurnished, as you see, but if there is time I will bring blankets, or something to make the stones of the floor less hard."

She was about to leave them when Primitivo addressed her.

"Will you wait one moment, señorita?" he asked. He was looking at her with somber, piercing gaze, so that she flushed under it, for already she had struck a light, and they were standing within its glare. "Was your mother a Mexican woman?" he added, after a pause. "And is she dead?"

"Yes," she replied. "Why do you ask?"

"Was her first name, or names, rather, Maria Anita, my child?"

"Yes. But how should you know that?"

"Because she was my sister. You are made in her image. You are Maria Anita over again. I knew that she married a Spaniard, but I never knew his name; and I would not go to see her, because I hate Spaniards. But you are my niece. I know it. I am Primitivo de Soto."

"And the name of my mother, before she married my father, was Maria Anita de Soto."

They stood staring at each other for a full minute, and then Eulalia stepped quickly forward, drew Primitivo's head toward her, and imprinted a soft kiss upon his forehead.

He started as if a bee had stung him, and his face flushed with the pride he felt in that caress; and he returned it by kissing her on the forehead also.

"What is your own name, child?" he asked, deeply moved.

"Eulalia."

"You need not go for the blankets yet. Look. I will show you something. See."

He stepped to the middle of the room, and, bending forward and using his knife as a wedge, he pried up one edge of a square stone in the floor until he could insert his fingers beneath it. Then he lifted it out of its place, disclosing a cavity below it from which a draft of fresh air blew into their faces, and extinguished the light.

"Come," he said. "Follow me;" and he stepped into the cavity. "There are stone steps here, although they are rudely made. But they will suffice. Descend and have no fear. There is another way for you to return, Eulalia, if you choose to take it. Come."

He waited until they had passed him, and then he restored the flat stone to its place in the flooring. Then he struck a *cerillo*, and lighted the lamp that he had taken

the precaution to bring with him; and they discovered that they were in a large, square chamber dug out of the hard earth.

It had no windows, and apparently no door save the one by which they had entered, and yet it seemed to be perfectly ventilated; and, moreover, there was a fireplace at one side of the room.

"It is more of my father's work," Primitivo announced. "This chimney connects with the main chimney of the house, and serves to ventilate the room. And there is a secret way out of it by an underground passage that leads—well, you would not understand if I told you, but it leads to liberty."

CHAPTER VII.

ROSE, AS THE BANDITS' CAPTIVE.

Just then the sound of shouting reached them faintly, and the detective stepped forward.

"Eulalia," he said, "it sounds to me as if your father had returned with his other prisoner. Will you go now and find out what is happening, and keep us informed?"

"Yes," she replied. "I will let you know as soon as possible."

"And, Eulalia," said her uncle, "if there is an opportunity, place food in the room above us. We have not eaten in a long time, and we are hungry. Come; I will let you out through the trap-door into the room overhead."

She nodded brightly, and was gone; and then Nick turned to Primitivo.

"You will think more of Spaniards after this, eh, Primitivo?" he asked.

"No, señor. It is the Mexican blood in her that has served us. I hate the Spanish blood that runs in her veins; but she is my sister's child, and made in her image."

"Well," said Nick, then, "I want you both to understand one thing. I have made a compact with Eulalia—a compact to which we must all adhere. I have promised her that in return for her aid I will help her to save her father."

"To save him? How?" growled Primitivo.

"To express it as she did herself, to save him from himself. It seems from what she told me that old Miguel is about half-mad since he was obliged to leave the service of the mistress he has served so long. It has crazed him. That is why he has taken all this trouble to be avenged. He blames all his misfortunes upon Mr. Chittenden and his family. But you understand me. No matter what happens, we must do all that can be done to spare Miguel, and to save him from the consequences of his acts. Such is my promise to Eulalia."

They both agreed, and after a short pause Nick spoke again.

"Primitivo," he said, "I will ask you now to show me the way out of here through the secret passage, "and when you have done that I want you both to return here to this room and wait for me."

"If the señor would consent to take me with him——" began Primitivo, but Nick cut him off short.

"No," he said. "I prefer to make my reconnaissance alone; but I will not be long."

"Come then," replied the Guerreran.

From the floor of the chamber he removed another stone, much as he had done so in the room over their heads; and another flight of stone steps was disclosed, down which he led the way at once.

"It is many years since I was here, señor," he said, "but now it seems but yesterday."

"You certainly remember it all very well indeed," said Nick. "Hal, will you wait where you are?"

"Yes. I will wait here," was the reply.

Primitivo led the detective through an underground passage that ran as straight as an arrow toward the mountain where they had descended the precipice; and after walking a considerable distance they ascended through a well-like place, on steps made of stone that ran around it spirally, presently emerging, after Primitivo had raised another flat stone, in the center of a cluster of thick bushes.

Nick found that he was about midway between the cliffs and the houses, and that he could readily go where he pleased from there, with very little danger of discovery, unless indeed he should step out into the light, or should be brought suddenly face to face with one of the bandits.

"We might have entered here when we first arrived," said Nick to his guide.

"To tell you the truth, señor, I had utterly forgotten the place until Eulalia led us into the room over the subterranean chamber. Then I recalled it. Shall I remain here and wait for you?"

"No. Return to young Chittenden; and keep your eye out for that food Eulalia is to bring to us. We all need it."

"*Si, señor;*" and he was gone.

For a little while the detective remained where he was, bending his attention upon getting his bearings. He could see that the expected party had not arrived in the valley as yet, but he could also tell that the members of it were momentarily expected.

Doubtless they had passed the outer guard on the mountain, and the fact of their coming had been signaled ahead. That would account for the shouting.

Nick had no doubt that the information he had heard discussed between Pancho and Sus had been whispered about from lip to ear among all the men, until every one knew that a beautiful girl was to be brought there.

But now the detective felt less misgivings than when he first heard about the capture of Rose. Then there was only himself and two others to depend upon to rescue her and her father; but now, in Eulalia, he felt that he had a host; a host in the fact that they were already safely concealed inside the house where Rose would be confined, and they possessed secrets of the place which even the bandits themselves did not know.

While he watched and waited, another shout went up. A pistol-shot rang out, and then another and another, and then through the starlight he could see several horsemen ride into the valley from the mountain trail.

Among them, too, he saw the figure of a woman, and he had no doubt that it was Rose.

He wished with all his heart that there was some way in which he could make it known to her he was there watching, and prepared to defend and rescue her; but that was impossible.

"And, anyhow," he thought, "she will know that we cannot be very far off. She will have faith in us, and Rose is not one to be easily frightened."

He went forward cautiously to obtain a better position to see and hear, and presently arrived at almost the same spot from which he had listened to the conversation between Pancho and Sus; but he took care this time to conceal himself better, so that if another should come upon him as Eulalia had done, he would not again be discovered.

Old Miguel and his men rode into the circle of light cast by the fire, and threw themselves out of their saddles.

The fire had been plentifully replenished, and now it cast a brilliant glare over the scene, and for many yards around where they stood.

Other hands seized the horses and led them away, and it was old Miguel himself who stepped forward and lifted Rose from the saddle to the ground.

She was so exhausted that she could barely stand; Nick saw that plainly, and yet she preserved a dignified silence and glanced with more scorn than fear in her eyes, upon the hard and forbidding and swarthy faces that surrounded her.

It was at this instant that Eulalia stepped into the circle of light and went directly to Rose. Then she turned and, facing her father, said in a quiet voice:

"My father, I will take charge of this prisoner. She shall come with me."

He nodded his head and waved his hand toward the house he called his own.

"Take her away," he said. "She is hungry; give her food. She is tired; give her rest."

"*Espera un momentito, jefe*"—wait one little minute, chief—a voice called out, and Pancho slouched forward somewhat sullenly. "It is not fair that the young lady should be taken away until we have a chance to see her, and I——"

A gun as big as any that her father carried suddenly appeared in the hand of Eulalia, and Pancho found himself looking directly into the muzzle of it.

"Stand back, Pancho," she said quietly, "or there will be one less member of the company. Stand back instantly, or I will fire."

He evidently saw that she meant what she said, for he fell back without another word, and Eulalia without so much as another glance toward him, turned and took Rose by the hand.

"Come with me, and have no fear," she whispered.

A bright flush of pleasure stole into the face of Rose as she complied; and the two girls walked away together toward the house, without even a murmur of disapproval following after them; and even old Miguel gazed after his daughter with pride glistening in his eyes.

The whole assemblage watched the pair in utter silence until they entered the chief's house, and then something like a sigh of relief escaped many of them. It was as if they feared all the time that something unexpected was about to occur.

And something was happening that was not down on the program for as they walked toward the house, Eulalia was murmuring in a low tone to Rose:

"Have no fear, Señorita Chittenden, for I will protect you. You shall not be injured. No harm of any kind shall come to you. And there are others here who will protect you also."

"Others?" gasped Rose, her heart almost stopping in the hope that flew into it that her brother and Nick Carter were near at hand. "What others?"

"Hush! Not so loud. You must not betray even by an expression of hope in your eyes that you know, but your brother is here; Señor Carter is here; Primitivo de Soto, who is my uncle, my mother's brother is here."

"And you—you will befriend me even against your own father?" said Rose.

"I will befriend you. Indeed I will. Have no fear."

"And my father? What of him? Oh, tell me, please."

"He is here. He is a prisoner like yourself; but I have already cared for him as well as I was able to do so, and those who are here will see that no harm comes to him."

"What is your name, please?"

"You may call me Eulalia, señorita. That is my name."

"And you may call me Rose. If you do that I will think, indeed, that I have found a friend where I least expected to do so. Where are you taking me, Eulalia?"

"To my own room, in the house that is just in front of us. It is where my father and I have lived since we came to this place. Oh, it was terrible that we had to come here, but after my father captured you and your brother, and made you prisoners that other time,* he did not dare to remain at the hacienda to face the wrath of Señora Del Puente, and he fled with me here to these mountains."

"But the señora would have forgiven him; I have heard her say so."

"Do you suppose she would do so still—Rose?"

"Yes; if I asked it of her. If my father asked it of her."

"Has she forgiven your father entirely for the wrong he once did her? Pardon me, but my father has told me all about that time so long ago, and I have wondered about it."

*See NICK CARTER WEEKLY No. 592.

"Eulalia, the señora is to become my second mother. My father and she are to be married. Is not that sufficient proof of forgiveness?"

"Indeed it is. My father must be told about it. It may make a difference in his plans. The knowledge of it may bring him back to his reason. You are very tired, Rose?"

"I am almost dead; but what you have told me has given me new life."

"You shall go to my own room at once. You shall sleep with me. And while you are preparing, I will fix you something to eat and a glass of wine. Ah, Rose, I understand now why Heaven permitted my father to bring me hither. It was that I could be here when you came as a prisoner. It was so that I might be here to protect and care for you—and you are so beautiful, Rose!"

"Hush, Eulalia. I am not nearly so beautiful and so good as you are. Your eyes are like stars, and you look to me now like an angel from heaven, Eulalia."

"That is only because I have befriended you," smiled Eulalia.

"Perhaps. I wonder if, after I get to your room, you will let me have a good cry."

"Yes, yes; and it will do you good, I know."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SHOOTING OF PANCHO.

In the meantime other scenes were taking place back there at the fire where the men were facing old Miguel, waiting to hear what he would have to say about the captive; and presently Pancho addressed him.

"Miguel," he said, "did you not appoint me second in command when you were elected chief of our company?"

The old man nodded.

"You told me before you departed on these errands that have turned out so finely that you would bring back here as prisoners a man who could pay well for his ransom, and a young woman who should become the wife of one of us; is it not so?"

"Yes," replied Miguel; but his eyes were fierce, and he was scowling.

"Well, you must also have told others, or, at least, an-

other besides myself, for the news has got out among the men that we are to shake dice for the girl."

"I told none but you, and it is you who have given out the information," said Miguel quietly; but the most obtuse person there could plainly see that it was an ominous quiet. Pancho seemed to be the only one present who was unmindful of it.

"You gave us no chance to see the girl; to know what we had to expect," he continued.

"It was not my pleasure to do so. What more?"

"This. The men are eager for the game. We wish to begin it now, and have it settled."

"The game will be begun at my will and pleasure, Pancho; not before."

"Oh, I don't know. There are others here besides myself who think that you are not just the man we want for our chief, in the business we have——"

He got no further than that.

The old man's right hand shot out straight in front of him; a burst of flame and a loud report interrupted what Pancho was saying, and the man pitched forward on his face on the grass, and, save for a quivering that ran through his body, he did not move again.

And Miguel, after looking down upon him for a moment, raised his eyes and moved them around the now silent group of men. Then he said quietly:

"Is there any other man here who would question my authority? If so, let him step forward."

Not one of them moved a muscle, and, after waiting a moment, the old man thrust the pistol back again into his belt and deliberately turned his back upon them all; and he strode away toward the house where Eulalia had taken Rose.

It was a tragic scene, but it was soon over.

Pancho, at least, would never again question the authority of his chief. He was forever beyond that now.

Some of the men raised his body from the ground and bore it away; and then the others, one by one, slunk toward their quarters, where they slept, and it was not long before that place near the fire was entirely deserted, and Nick Carter, in his place of concealment, was practically alone.

He had turned to retrace his steps to the entrance of the underground gallery, when an inspiration made him halt, and he turned about and walked rapidly toward the prison house where Mr. Chittenden was confined.

Approaching it silently, he stopped close to it and stood in the deeper shadow for a moment, while he waited to see if he had been observed; and determining that he had not, and that since the tragedy which resulted in the death of Pancho the men had indeed gone to rest, he turned to the door.

It was fastened from the outside only by a bar placed across it, for the lock that had once graced it was long since rusted out and useless.

The detective raised the bar and slowly pushed the door open. Then he entered.

He could see nothing, of course; but after a little he spoke in a low tone.

"Mr. Chittenden," he said. "Don't make any noise, but answer me."

"I am here, Mr. Carter," was the quiet reply. "I cannot imagine how you could have arrived so soon, but I am overjoyed to know that you are here. I could see you when you entered the door. You were so strongly outlined against the starlight, and I have been so long in the dark. I knew you at once, but I waited for you to speak."

Nick had approached him while he was talking, and now was unfastening the bonds which held him.

He took the trouble to untie them for the reason that he wished to puzzle the bandits all he could about the escape.

If the bonds that held Mr. Chittenden had been cut, they would have suspected at once the presence in their camp of a traitor and a confederate, and Eulalia might have been suspected. Nick wished to obviate such a chance, if possible.

He even took the precaution, after Mr. Chittenden was safely on his feet, and free, to use the heavy bar that had held the door to pry away one of the fastenings at one side of the door, thus making it appear that the man had forced it from the inside.

When he had attended to all those details, he told Mr. Chittenden to follow him, and together they left the prison house behind them, and hurried across the intervening space toward the cluster of bushes where the entrance to the subterranean passage was located.

They were not long in getting out of sight, and the flat stone that covered the entrance was soon in place over their heads; and then, through the darkness, Nick led his companion straight to the room underneath the house where Rose was already sleeping quietly, and with confidence in her ultimate safety.

They found Hal and Primitivo seated around a rude table whereon a plentiful supply of food had been placed, for Eulalia had not forgotten them, and there was more than sufficient for all their needs.

We will pass over the greetings between father and son. As for Nick, he lost no time in helping himself to some of the food that was there, for he stood greatly in need of it; but when he had eaten, and had found a cigar in one of his pockets, he seated himself with his back against the wall, and remarked quietly:

"Well, none of us expected just this sort of a picnic, did we?"

"It is a very pleasant picnic for me after what has happened," replied Mr. Chittenden. "I have had reason to expect the worst from that old villain who hates me so. Do you know, Carter, I think the man is mad."

"I haven't the least doubt of it," replied the detective. "Tell us about your capture, and your journey here, Mr. Chittenden."

"My capture was a strange thing. I remember that I had just beat forward with my croquet-mallet in hand to take aim, when it seemed as if I were seized from behind. Then I knew that the loop of a rope had encircled my body, and the next instant I was hoisted over the wall as if a steam-derrick had me in its grip."

"And then——"

"I was thrown bodily into a saddle. I was sternly told that if I made the slightest outcry, or attempted to escape, I would be shot on the instant; and I knew that old Miguel meant it when he said it. I was in his power, and there was nothing for me but to obey."

"Quite right."

"We rode at a fast gallop many miles. Once we stopped long enough for Miguel to search me for fire-arms; but, of course, I had none. And then they tied my feet together with a rope that was passed under the horse's belly. After that I rode in great discomfort."

"I haven't a doubt of that."

"At first I bore it very well; but little by little I began to suffer agonies. You know I am not accustomed to being on a horse's back. It was frightful."

"It must have been torture."

"I really thought I should die before we arrived at our journey's end."

"You are in rather good condition now, considering what you passed through."

"There was a young woman who came to me after I was cast into my prison house, and I owe my present condition largely to her ministrations."

Then Nick told him about Eulalia, and what she had done for them. As yet, however, he had said nothing about the arrival there of Rose; but now he believed it to be time to take the others into his confidence, and, as directly as possible, he told them all that had occurred.

"And those fiends returned, after they captured me, to make a prisoner of my daughter? Of my Rose?" exclaimed Chittenden. "Ah! Mr. Carter, what would we have done without you?"

"I think, at the present moment, it is more pertinent to ask what any of us would have done without Eulalia," replied Nick, smiling. "Hark! What is that?"

They listened, and could plainly hear a slight tapping on the stones over their heads, and Primitivo rose hastily and went to the stone stairs.

"It is Eulalia come to talk with us," he said; and without waiting for permission, he raised the flagstone from its place.

She descended among them at once, and stopped, greatly surprised, when she beheld Mr. Chittenden among them.

"Was it wise to hasten matters?" she asked, turning toward the detective.

"I thought so," he replied. "Anyhow, I couldn't find it in my heart to keep him longer in ignorance of our presence here, and when I got there, it never occurred to me to leave him. I brought him directly here."

"But my father will know that some one has released him. It will put him on his guard. And more; it will make a demon of him, I fear."

"I left everything," replied the detective, "as if Mr. Chittenden had managed to free himself. I even made it appear that he had forced the bar from its place across the door. But, anyhow, I couldn't leave him there, and there is not one among them who suspect our presence here."

"N-no."

"And they do not know of the existence of this place. You had never heard about it, had you, Eulalia?"

"No."

"You did not suspect its presence here until your uncle showed it to you, did you?"

"No."

"Then I have this to suggest."

"Well, Mr. Carter?"

"You had better do what you can do without discovery to stock us up with food. Then, if any serious danger threatens Rose, you are to bring her here, and come with her yourself. It will appear then as if you and she together had somehow escaped from the valley, and——"

"But I could not leave my father. He needs me. He is not himself. Even now he is walking the floor of his room, muttering to himself. I think he is losing his reason. I could not desert him, Mr. Carter."

"I was thinking of your own safety, child—of the men who surround your father. You know if Rose should disappear while she is in your charge, they would hold you accountable for it, and no one knows what might happen in such a case."

"I am quite capable of taking care of myself, even among them," she replied simply.

"I believe that you think so. I know that you are not afraid. But suppose, when they find that they cannot shake dice for Rose, because Rose has disappeared——"

"What is that?" cried Mr. Chittenden.

"I will tell you presently, sir," replied Nick; and he continued, addressing Eulalia: "Suppose that when they find that Rose is not there they should substitute you in her place? No, Eulalia, you had better come here with Rose when the moment arrives that suggests danger to either of you. Danger to one of you, now, means danger to both, Eulalia."

CHAPTER IX.

WHEN THE ESCAPE WAS DISCOVERED.

Eulalia left them soon after that, and they wrapped themselves in the blankets she had supplied, and disposing their bodies as comfortably as possible around that subterranean chamber, they also slept—and it was the sleep of utter fatigue for all of them, too.

No daylight could penetrate there to awaken them, and when Nick Carter opened his eyes and, by the aid of a match, looked at his watch, he was astonished to find that the time was after ten o'clock in the morning.

None of the others were astir, and he crept silently away, found the exit to the passage, passed through it, and made his way along it toward the flat stone in the cluster of bushes at the opposite end.

He had no sooner stepped out into the opening than he saw evidences of great excitement on every hand.

Men were running hither and thither. Some were shouting, others gesticulating, and it all resolved itself into the fact that it had just been discovered that their prisoner was missing.

The detective could not help smiling as he watched them.

Men who came from their overlate repose, and were told that the prisoner had escaped, appeared not to believe it, and ran at once to the prison house to look for themselves; and there, of course, they found the loosened cords that had bound him; they found the disrupted socket where the bar had been placed across the door, and they could refuse to believe no longer.

Everything looked as if the prisoner had succeeded in untying himself, and had then, with superhuman strength, forced the door against the bar until the latter had been torn from its place across it.

Presently other men ran for their horses, and Nick could see them galloping away toward the pass through the mountains which formed the entrance and exit of the valley.

And then, in the midst of the excitement, old Miguel came out of his house and walked down toward them, wonderingly.

He who was called Sus ran forward and told him what had happened; and, like the others, Miguel went at once to the prison house.

Nick could hear nothing that was said, but he could imagine a great deal of it.

He saw the men standing around Miguel, gesticulating and talking; and that the old man listened with calmness until they had finished. Then he said something, and they fell back apparently in great astonishment, and Nick guessed that Miguel had said that Mr. Chittenden could not have gotten out of his prison unaided.

He saw the men look rather askance at one another, as if it were possible that one of them were guilty; and then the entire party moved on foot across the valley toward the entrance to the pass; and they took a direction which necessitated their passing quite close to the spot where the detective was concealed.

They came to a stop not far from Nick, and then Miguel spoke again.

"No one could enter this valley, to effect a rescue, without passing our outposts," he was saying, "and that you all know, as well as I do, is quite impossible. The man could not have untied those bonds without as-

sistance, and three men like him could not have forced that bar from the door from the inside. Besides, the bar shows plainly enough that it was used after it had been taken from its place to pry away the fastenings. That was done to give the appearance that the door had been forced from the inside.

"Then who was it who liberated him?" Sus cried out. The position of second in command seemed to have fallen upon his shoulders.

"There is a traitor among us," was the calm reply of old Miguel.

"And who is the traitor, Miguel? Perhaps you can point him out to us."

"No. But there is a traitor. There is one here who has thought to get all the ransom for himself."

"But the man cannot escape through the pass. The sentinels would stop him."

Miguel smiled coldly.

"It isn't at all likely that he has made any attempt to go through the pass," he said. "You are all here. There is no man missing. It is certain that the prisoner could not find his way through the pass and to the trail alone, even if there were no sentinels to stop him, and therefore the traitor who liberated him has also concealed him somewhere in the valley."

"But who? Who could have done it?"

"If Pancho were alive——"

"Pancho is not alive."

"I don't know who did it; but I will find out, and woe to him who did, Sus!"

"It is my opinion, chief, that you had better look in your own house for the prisoner," responded Sus hotly.

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Miguel, starting back and letting his hand fall toward his weapon.

"I mean Eulalia—your daughter. She is the only one—— Don't you draw your weapon, Miguel, for there is a man behind you who will kill you if you do. There has been quite enough killing in this bunch for the present. As I was saying, Eulalia is the only one who could have done it. Yesterday, when the prisoner was brought in, she went at once to him with food and blankets. She nursed him and cared for him, and now it is my belief that she has set him at liberty and concealed him in your own house."

Miguel looked from one face to another in amazement, and he saw that every one of them reflected the opinion that had been expressed so boldly by Sus.

"Follow me," he said. "It won't take us long to find out."

He wheeled about and led the way toward the house where he lived, and where even then Nick could see Eulalia standing near the doorway, shading her eyes with her hand and watching the scene.

For a moment he was himself undecided what to do; whether it would be better for him to hasten back to the subterranean chamber and give the alarm, or to wait where he was and watch what was happening.

He saw that by moving to the right so that he put the shed between him and them—the shed in front of which Pancho had been killed—he could approach quite near to the house without being seen, and remembering that there was almost no chance at all that the entrance to the hidden chamber would be discovered, he resolved to follow up what was happening.

Watching his opportunity, he darted across the space that brought him to where he was screened, and then he ran forward until he was under the shed.

Skirting that, he found that by keeping another and a smaller building between him and the house, he could approach close to it, and he presently darted around the corner, and entered through the rear door; the very door past which Eulalia had conducted him when he went to the house the first time, followed by Hal and Primitivo.

It was a daring thing for him to do, and perhaps a foolish one, to enter the house that was about to be searched; but he had an idea that by doing so he might not only hear all that took place, but could also at any moment escape to the room over the hidden chamber, and so drop down through the trap-door in the floor, and be in safety among his own friends, better than he could now return to them by the other route.

But even as he entered the house he discovered that his way to the room over the hidden chamber was already cut off, for the entire group of men were standing in the front room, but in such a position that they commanded the only approach to it that was available to Nick.

Eulalia was facing them.

Her eyes were flashing, her head was thrown back, her lips were parted just a little, and her cheeks were flushed.

It was evident that she felt not the least fear, and that she knew, even before her father uttered a word, that they had come there to charge her with having liberated the prisoner.

Fortunately, she could with perfect truthfulness deny it.

She had had nothing whatever to do with his escape. It was perhaps that knowledge that gave her added courage.

"Eulalia," said her father sternly, "where is the prisoner?"

"The prisoner?" she replied. "He should be where you placed him, should he not?"

"That is begging the question. Where is he, I say?"

"Why do you ask that question of me? Of your daughter?"

"Because you have been charged with aiding him to escape."

"Who so charges me?"

"Sus—and the others. All the men do, in fact."

"Upon what grounds?"

"They say that you went to him yesterday, and gave him food and blankets. They say——"

"So much is true, father; but it is not true that I aided him to escape. If he has escaped, I have had nothing to do with it."

The old man wheeled and faced his followers.

"You hear?" he demanded. "Eulalia has never told me a lie in her life."

"She lies now," said Sus. "She——"

The old man's weapon leaped from its holster, but before he could make use of it, Eulalia sprang forward and tore it from his grasp.

"No more of that, father, please!" she cried out.

He looked at her for a moment with sodden eyes; then he said, in a quiet tone to Sus:

"If you repeat such a remark as that, Sus, I will kill you. If not now, then some other time. Don't forget what I say. Eulalia?"

"Yes, father."

"Will you swear that you did not aid that man to escape?"

"Yes, father, I so swear."

"It is enough. I believe; and so must these others."

And indeed they looked from face to face among themselves in consternation.

They had made so sure that the escape was the work of Eulalia, that they found it hard to change their minds; and yet there was the appearance of utter truth in the manner of the girl.

Sus stepped forward again, as belligerent as ever.

"At least we will search the house," he said. "It was so agreed when we came here."

"Search as much as you like," said Miguel. "It will do you no good."

"The man may have escaped himself and have hidden here, thinking it the safest place in the valley," continued Sus.

"He may have hidden himself in the moon, too, Sus. You are a fool—or a knave, I don't know which," said Miguel angrily. "You are as likely to be the traitor as any of us; more likely than my daughter Eulalia."

"*Caramba*, old man, if you——"

This time Miguel did not resort to a weapon, but he leaped forward and seized Sus by the throat; and then he backed him across the room until he forced him against the wall, and there he held him, choking him with a strength that one would not have supposed his old arms and fingers possessed. And when he released his hold, Sus collapsed upon the floor, limp and almost senseless. And not a man there offered to raise a hand to defend him.

"Search!" Chief Miguel said to the others. "Search if you like, and have done with it."

And so the search of the house began.

CHAPTER X.

NICK CARTER'S NARROW ESCAPE.

It must be remembered that it was in the middle of the forenoon, and therefore broad daylight, although the house, poorly supplied with windows, was rather dark.

The change came so quickly and the search was begun so abruptly, that Nick Carter, who had edged himself as far forward as possible in order to hear all that was said, found himself cut off in every direction save one, and that one was directly behind him.

Along the corridor a little way he saw an open door, and he darted toward it, realizing that now it was almost certain he would be caught sooner or later, but resolved to put off the unpleasant moment as long as possible.

He darted through the door and closed it behind him, locking it at the same time; and then he turned about, at the sound of a smothered exclamation, to find himself face to face with Rose Chittenden.

"You?" she exclaimed. "You? What is happening? What is going on out there?"

"They are searching the house for your father, Rose," he replied.

"They are not after you, then?"

"No; they don't know as yet that I am in the valley. They have no idea about it; but it looks as if they were about to discover the fact. If that window of yours wasn't secured with iron bars, I might get out this way, but as it is——"

"Hark!" she said, interrupting him; and then they heard a tapping at the door.

"It is I, Rose," came the voice of Eulalia. "Open and let me in."

"Are you alone?" replied Rose, approaching the door. "Are any of those men with you?"

"No. I am alone. Open quickly."

She did so, and Eulalia glided into the room, closing and fastening the door after her; and then her eyes fell upon Nick Carter.

"You?" she cried out. "Do you know that the men are searching the house, and that presently they will come here also?"

"I suppose so," replied Nick. "In fact, Eulalia, that is why I came here. It was the only way of escape that offered, and I took it."

"But they will find you."

"I'll have to admit that it does begin to look that way, Eulalia."

"And if they find you they will kill you. My father would kill you instantly. I know it. Oh, why did you come here?"

"I couldn't exactly help it, child; that is, I could not at the moment I came. I might have kept out of the mess in the beginning, I suppose; but it is too late to think about that now."

"What shall we do? They will be here in a moment. They will soon have searched the other rooms. I think this one will be the last."

The house, like the great majority of houses built in Mexico, was square and only one story in height, therefore all the rooms were on the ground floor. Unlike other Mexican houses, it was provided with a rear entrance, as we know, but in other respects it was the same.

Nick could easily have escaped by one of the two windows were it not for the fact that the old bandit chief who built it had provided them with iron bars, so strong and so firmly set into the stone, that a glance told the detective he could not hope to remove them without the aid, at least, of an iron bar.

The room where they were talking was exactly at the opposite end of the house from that one through which descent was had to the secret chamber, and, while the men were roaming about, there was no hope at all of reaching it.

Inside the room there was absolutely no place to hide.

There was not so much as a closet in the place; only two worm-eaten old wardrobes, neither of them large enough to offer concealment for the detective, and, anyhow, the men would lose no time in looking inside them once they were in the room.

"There seems to be no help for it but to wait and face the music," said the detective, with a shrug of his shoulders. "At least that is the way it looks now."

"I might go outside and try to keep them out of here," suggested Eulalia.

"That would only add to their suspicions, child."

"I might remain here and refuse to admit them."

"They would end by smashing in the door. It is heavy, to be sure, but with a small log of wood, or a bar of some kind, it would not take them long to demolish it."

"Then what *is* to be done?"

"I think there is nothing that can be done, Eulalia, but just wait, and meet what happens in the best way possible."

"But they will kill you. My father would shoot you on sight. I have heard him say as much since you came to the hacienda and rescued Rose and her brother."

Nick shrugged his shoulders.

Then, just as a resounding rap came against the panels of the door, he bounded to his feet.

"Parley with them," he said. "Parley with them, Eulalia. I have an idea."

"Oh, tell me what it is."

"Why, if there is one secret chamber in this house there should be others. If Primitivo's father and grandfather made one hiding-place here, when they built the house, it is more than likely that they made several."

The pounding upon the door was renewed with additional violence now, and Eulalia went to it and called out:

"It is I," replied the voice of her father. "Open."

"But this is my own private room, father."

"That makes no difference. It must be searched like the others."

"Miss Chittenden is here, too. She occupies this room with me, as you know."

"Open, I say. It makes no difference who is there with you. The men must be satisfied that the prisoner is not concealed in this house. They can only prove that by searching every room in it."

"Have they searched all the others?"

"Yes. All but this one. Open the door, unless you wish the men to break it down, Eulalia."

"The men can wait a moment, can't they?"

"For what?"

"Until Miss Chittenden makes herself presentable."

"The señorita is dressed, and you know it. I have seen her already this morning."

"But, my father, cannot one undress again after dressing. You will have to wait until I am ready to admit you—unless in your impatience you break down the door."

They could hear the sound of talking in low tones outside the door at this, and the footsteps of men hastening away. Then came the voice of Sus, who seemed to have recovered from the choking he had received.

"Open, señorita," he called out. "Let us make sure that the man is not there. After that we will go away. We have searched the rest of the house all but this one room."

"I will open presently, I tell you," she replied. "But you must wait until I am ready."

"Ah, if he is in there, and you think that he can escape, you are mistaken, Eulalia. I have some of the men outside to guard the windows, so open at once."

"I will not open the door until I am ready to do so, and you will have to wait a few moments, Sus. That is all there is about it."

During this time the detective had not been idle.

His first act was to rush to the windows and draw the heavy, solid wooden shutters, so plunging it almost in darkness.

Then, remembering that thus far every secret passageway that had been found had been entered by means of raising a flat stone, he began an examination of the flooring of the room.

Beginning at the center, as the most likely place, he passed from stone to stone, trying to move each one with his foot, trying to get the blade of his knife into the cracks between them.

It takes time to accomplish this in a room that is twenty feet square, and Nick began to realize that even if such a secret place were there, he might not have a chance to find it.

He began at the center, as has been said, and worked backward from there to the door at which Eulalia was parleying with the men, crossing from side to side and trying every stone he passed.

But he discovered not one that gave any indication of being movable.

At last he returned to the place of beginning and began to work in the opposite direction, toward the north wall of the room.

It is one of the many ironies of fate that frequently, when searching for something, it is found only at the very last. I have known men who, after starting a search, believed so in the superstition, that they would stop and begin at the opposite end.

It is certain that in this case Nick Carter discovered what he sought only at the very tail-end of his search—it was the very last stone untried in the room, and when he found that it was indeed movable—well, he wondered if even now he was to be disappointed, and if he would lift the stone from its place only to find solid earth beneath it.

It was the square stone in the northeast corner of the room.

He pried one edge of it up with his knife, as he had seen Primitivo do in the other case, and at last he got his fingers beneath the edge of it, while both the girls stood beside him looking on.

Their hands were clasped together, and they were bending forward eagerly when they saw at last that his search had been rewarded; and Eulalia uttered a little cry of astonished joy when she saw the detective lift the stone from its place and thus reveal a cavity beneath it where there were stone steps descending as in that other instance.

"Quick!" she exclaimed. "Get into it, Mr. Carter, no matter where it leads. Hark!"

There was a heavy thump at the door just then, and after it a voice called out—it was the voice of Sus again, and somehow Nick thought it had a new sound of authority in it, too, and he called out to Eulalia:

"Señorita, we have here a beam of heavy wood. Unless you open the door instantly, we will force it. What say you?"

"Open it," said Nick, as he leaped into the cavity. "Tell him that you are ready now."

"I am ready to open now," Eulalia called out, in reply to Sus. "Just one little minute."

"Make haste, then."

"Eulalia," said Nick, with only his head above the floor, "when I lower the stone into its place, do you take your handkerchief and brush away any dust or dirt that might be left around it near the cracks."

"I will," she said. "I will! Hurry."

He lowered himself farther into the cavity, and then let the stone drop into its place; and then, after waiting a moment in silence, he heard the treading of heavy feet on the stone floor above him, and knew that the men had been admitted to the room.

Smiling to himself at the narrowness of his escape, he passed on down the stone steps to the bottom of the place, and then lighted a wax *cerillo*, so that he could look around him and find out where he was.

And then he uttered an exclamation of amazement, for he saw at once that he was in the treasure-chamber of the old bandit chiefs; a treasure-chamber in which was accumulated all sorts of valuable articles, not the least among which were half a dozen wooden boxes, without covers, and each was filled with ingots of silver and gold, as they are molded at rudely constructed smelters.

CHAPTER XI.

A CRITICAL TIME.

In the center of the chamber in which the detective so providentially found himself there was a square table, and upon this rested a candle that must have been there very many years; but in that climate, which is as dry as a bone, nothing wastes or rots.

Even the wood boxes which contained the gold and silver ingots showed no ravages of the time that must have elapsed since that room was last entered.

It was literally a bandit's treasure-house, and Nick thought as he looked around him that it must have belonged to Primitivo's grandfather, and that even his father had been ignorant of its existence.

"There should be another way out of here, too," mused the detective as he looked around him. "That old bandit was much too crafty a customer to have left only one opening to his treasure-house."

Disregarding the jewels, and the rest of the treasure that was around him, he began a second search for a passageway out, relying upon his past experiences, and the primitive methods adopted by the old bandit, to help him.

It was a long and a difficult task that he essayed, but he was so sure of success in the end that he never once thought of desisting.

But this second passageway proved even more difficult to find than the one through the floor, and hour after hour passed while he still searched.

Once he stopped and went to the stone steps, and to the top of them, to listen, but as he could hear nothing he returned again to the treasure-chamber and resumed his searching.

His idea was that it would not be safe for him to return to the room above until he heard some sort of signal from one of the young women.

He believed that the moment it was safe to do so, they would either stamp their feet upon the floor over his head, to apprise him that the coast was clear, or what was more likely, they would lock the door of their room and then raise the stone, or at least signal to him to do so.

And so he continued with his search for an exit from the treasure-chamber, convinced all the time that there was one, and that he would find it.

He did not know about the flight of time.

As nearly as he could estimate, it must have been approximately eleven o'clock, or possibly half after eleven, when he entered the treasure-chamber and dropped the stone over his head.

When at last he did succeed in finding that other movable stone, it was two in the afternoon.

He had forgotten that he was hungry, but now, as he stepped into the passage disclosed by moving the second stone, he recalled the fact that he had eaten nothing since ten o'clock the preceding night, and sixteen hours without food is quite a while.

The discovery of the passageway disclosed a narrow corridor, square in construction, cut out of the solid earth—a kind of solid earth which is almost like rock, and which is well known throughout some parts of Mexico. It is called, locally, *teputati*, and has almost the consistency of soft rock, although it may readily be worked with a pick.

The gallery led him forward a little distance, and then seemed to come to an abrupt end; but after another long

search, which consumed half an hour, he found a way through the wall, and passed on again as before.

He was stopped a second time in the same manner, and again had to search several minutes before he found the way through; but then he stepped out, much to his surprise, into the very corridor he had used that morning in going from the hidden chamber where his friends were awaiting him, to the open air, on the journey that had brought about all his experiences since that time.

He closed the opening as he passed through, and at once turned toward the place where the others should be awaiting him, and when he entered the room they all started up to receive him.

"We were just consulting about you," said Mr. Chittenden, with delight in his tones. "You were missing when we awoke, and we waited a long time for you, in doubt whether you would wish any of us to follow you. Then Primitivo ventured through the passageway to the end of it, and presently returned to announce that something was going on up at the house of the chief—this house over our heads, Mr. Carter."

"Precisely," smiled Nick.

"Primitivo was of the opinion that you had been captured. He thought they had you in the house, and he tried to get up into it through the trap-door; but something heavy has been placed on the stone so that it is impossible to move it, although we have all had a try at it."

"And so you were discussing what was best to be done, eh?"

"Yes. We had just decided that Primitivo should venture through the passage and try to find out, although we were all of the opinion that very little could be accomplished before dark."

"But here I am, and so your anxiety is relieved."

"Very greatly."

"Well, I had a narrow squeak of it, all right," replied the detective; and then he told them of everything that had happened since he left them sleeping and went out alone to reconnoiter.

"Suppose Rose and Eulalia should look for you down that hole where you disappeared, now?" asked Mr. Chittenden. "Wouldn't they be frightened at not finding you there?"

"No; I don't think so. Not at all. They would at once suppose that I had found another exit."

The detective now turned to Primitivo, who had been a close listener to all this, although he had not offered a remark concerning it.

"Primitivo," said Nick, "have you never heard of that other secret chamber?"

"I have heard about it, señor, yes. But I did not know about it. In fact, I had made up my mind that it did not exist. I remember when I was a boy that my father used often to search for it, but always vainly. He could never find it. Later, I made some effort myself on one occasion to find it, but was unsuccessful."

"Then you have guessed what it contains, Primitivo?"

"I know what it should contain, señor."

"Well, it's there, all right, and lots of it, and it belongs, as far as I can see, to you and to Eulalia equally. Roughly estimated, I should say that there is two or three hundred thousand dollars' worth of treasure there."

"What?" exclaimed the others.

"It is so," insisted Nick. "Perhaps Primitivo can explain it."

"It represents the fortunes of my grandfather and great-grandfather," said the Guerreran. "Much of it was brought here by my great-grandfather from Guerrera, but I have been told that he died soon after that. My grandfather inherited it, and of course added to it. But he died very suddenly—it was a bullet that killed him—and he did not have time to tell my father the secret of the place; hence he never found it. But, Señor Carter, it is not fair that Eulalia and I should have it all now. You and these other gentlemen are entitled to a share in it; you most of all, since you found it."

"Finding it doesn't make it mine, Primitivo. It belongs to you and to Eulalia in equal shares, since an equal share should have gone to her mother. Hark! What is that?"

A fusillade of pistol-shots sounded dully in the depths of the hidden chamber where they were, and it was followed by the occasional spiteful crack of others, for all the world as if some sort of a fight were going on outside the house.

"We must see what that is," said the detective. "It sounds to me as if the men were fighting among themselves, and if they are, it can mean but one thing—danger to Rose and Eulalia. Come! Let me see if I can lift that stone over our heads."

He ran up the stone steps and, bracing himself beneath the stone trap, placed his shoulders beneath it; and then slowly—very slowly at first—the stone began to rise.

Presently, whatever it was on top that had held it down slid off and away, and the flat stone flew out into the vacant room over their heads.

In an instant Nick crawled through the opening, and was closely followed by the others.

But Nick did not wait to see if they were following him.

He dashed straight ahead for the door which communicated with the corridor, pulled it open, and, after waiting an instant to make sure that he would not run into the open arms of the bandits, he pressed forward again and sought one of the rooms at the front of the house, from the windows of which he knew he would command a view of almost the entire valley.

The scene which confronted him and the others who followed after almost beggars description, although it was one that explained itself instantly to Nick Carter's intelligent mind.

Directly in front of the house was a mangle-nut tree, with long limbs extending horizontally from it on either side. Over one of these arms a rope had been thrown, and now at the end of that rope dangled a man—or something that had once been a man, for now it was only a thing.

But that thing represented all there was left of old Miguel Montez. It was plain to Nick that his men had turned upon him at last. They had hung him to the limb of the mangle-nut tree, and then, while he swayed to and fro in front of them, they had riddled his body with bullets.

But that was not all.

At a little distance from the tree, seated in chairs that had been brought from the house, and to which they had been securely bound with riatas—bound so that they could not move, and so that they were compelled to face that scene of horror, were Rose and Eulalia—and Nick Carter understood now why they had not signaled for him to come up from his hiding-place under the room they had occupied together.

A little distance in front of them was a table, also brought from the house, and upon the table was a dice-cup, and the small white cubes that have done so much harm in the world ever since they were invented; and even as they peered through the window, one of the bandits on hearing his name called out by Sus, who was evidently the new chief, stepped forward and seized the cup.

He shook the dice within it for a moment, and then cast them upon the table. Then he uttered a shout and cried out:

"Dies y sieta!"—Seventeen!

He retired, and another took his place, throwing but twelve, and retiring in great disgust. Then another threw sixteen. It was only too apparent what they were dicing for, but as if the added information were needed, Sus at that moment called out:

"Remember, he who wins the first bout not only wins a wife, but he has his choice also."

"Seventeen!" called out another who had just thrown the dice. "A tie for the high throw."

And then one by one the bandits stepped forward and threw the dice, and twice more was seventeen tied before it came to the turn of Sus, the chief, who had reserved the last throw for himself.

He stepped forward with great confidence, and with a smile on his cruel face. Then he seized the cup and threw—Eighteen.

"I win!" he cried. "I choose the golden-haired one! Now, you others, throw for Eulalia!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE FLIGHT UP THE CLIFF.

With marked deliberation Primitivo slowly raised his revolver and took careful aim at Sus, and he would have fired had not the detective seized him by the arm and stopped him.

"What would you do?" he demanded. "Seal their doom? Wait. They are in no immediate danger, since it is intended to send for the padre. Wait, Primitivo. There are twenty-eight men there, and we are only four. We will fight them all if need be, but not now. We must wait till the young ladies are brought back into the house. Unless I greatly err, they will be returned to their own room. That will be our chance. But we will remain where we can see, and if there is reason for it, we will not hesitate to shoot."

The two girls were stonily calm. They understood that somewhere near them were four determined men who would risk all for their sakes. They knew that the end was not yet.

But the finish of the dicing came presently, and the ruffian who won Eulalia for a wife stepped quickly to-

ward her, as if to seize her in his arms; but he recoiled before the muzzle of a revolver in the hands of Sus, and sullenly withdrew. Then Sus bowed before them.

"Ladies," he said, "you have witnessed the dicing. You have seen that it was conducted fairly, and you must abide by the results. For the present, however, until the padre can be brought here from Morelia, you will be returned to your room, from which you cannot escape, and I will myself conduct you there; I, the chief."

Nick started back from the window hastily.

"Come with me," he said to his friends. "And be quick!"

They hurried back to the room with the trap-door, descended through it, and closed it after them, and then Nick led the way with great haste through the underground passage to the treasure-chamber, and he himself ran up the stone steps to the top, arriving there just as the heavy tread of Sus sounded upon the stone flagging.

He heard the rumble of Sus' voice as he said something to the girls; then came the sound of the closing door, and almost instantly thereafter the tap tap, tap of a signal upon the movable stone over his head.

He lost no time in lifting it, and he sprang out into the room followed by the others, and in another moment Rose was folded in the arms of her father, and Primitivo, with tears in his eyes, embraced Eulalia. And then Mr. Chittenden, releasing his daughter, stepped over to Eulalia and also embraced her, as he said:

"My child, from this day on I want you to let me be as a father to you;" and she fell, weeping, into his embrace.

"Primitivo," said Nick, drawing him aside, "there is only one way out of this difficulty now, and that is the ascent of the cliff, by the way we came. It must be done. In the treasure-room under us there are half a dozen horse-hair riatas, and I have thought by fastening them together we could stretch them along the dangerous part of the cliff, and so take the young ladies and Mr. Chittenden across safely. It is the only way."

Primitivo nodded, and then Nick called to the others.

"Come," he said. "We will not have to wait for darkness to make our escape fortunately. We will go through the passage to the bushes, and they will screen us to the cliffs. We must be at the top before dark. Eulalia, come with me. Hal, take your sister. Primitivo, lead the way. Mr. Chittenden, follow Primitivo. Hal, follow your father with your sister. I will close the way after us as we go."

They passed through the underground galleries without incident, arriving safely and quickly at the outlet. There, from among the bushes that screened them, they could see that the bandits were already beginning their carouse, while three of them were galloping across the valley toward the pass, doubtless in search of the padre they were to bring.

Screened by the bushes and the trees that came next to them, they made their way, unseen, to the bottom of the cliff, and then began the long and toilsome ascent of a thousand feet. It was heart-breaking in its severity, too.

When the dangerous spot was reached, Nick sent Primitivo ahead with one end of the joined lariats in his hand, and with instructions how to use it when he should get across the narrow space.

"Now, Mr. Chittenden," he said, when all was in readiness. "You go first. We will practise on you. The rope will hold you if your hands should slip; but don't let them slip;" and he did not. He made the passage in safety.

"Now, Hal," he ordered, "you take the rope in my place. I will go across with Rose, and then return for Eulalia. Can you come last without the aid of the rope?"

"Can I? You bet I can! I could climb up that smooth rock, almost, I am so overjoyed."

The detective took Rose safely across the abyss, and then returned for Eulalia.

"I think, Hal," he said, "that you had better accompany Eulalia. I will come last. Go!"

And so the passage, so perilous, was safely made at last, and all stood within the opening of the cavern that led through the mountain to liberty.

So expeditious were they in their movements that it was not yet dark when they came out at the opposite end of the cavern and made their way slowly to where Nick and the others had left the three horses; and they found them there safe and in good condition.

"Rose and Eulalia will ride double on the biggest horse," said Nick, in a tone that admitted of no argument. "Mr. Chittenden, you will take the chestnut. Primitivo, you will take the pinto and ride for your life to the Hacienda del Montanas. From there you will telephone to Morelia, to Captain Sanches, to start out at once to meet us on the Morelia trail. Tell him also to

arrest the three men he will meet on the trail going toward Morelia, and describe them as well as you can. I would follow you to the hacienda, only I don't know the trail across the mountains; but I do know my way from here into the Morelia trail, because you brought us that way. When you have delivered your message, ride on and overtake us if you can. You have the fleetest and best horse. Now go. We will travel straight down the trail until we meet Sanches. Hal and I will run beside the horses with a hand on the stirrup-straps."

Primitivo was gone like a flash, and then, just as darkness fell, the fugitives started forward eagerly.

We need not describe that flight through the night and down the mountain trail, although it was picturesque and interesting.

It was eleven o'clock that night when they came upon Sanches and his Rurales, pounding up the trail toward them, hurrying to the rescue; and they were speedily surrounded by the swarthy but interesting soldiers of the president, who congratulated them eagerly upon their escape. Nick's first question to Sanches was:

"Did you meet the three bandits who were after the padre?"

"Yes," he replied grimly; "and they resisted us. There are their horses. Will you take one of them and guide us back to the Plaza Abajo? I will send four men with the others as escort."

And so it fell out that Nick retraced his steps, after all, to the stronghold of the bandits, leaving Rose and Eulalia in the care of Hal and Mr. Chittenden and four of the Rurales, who started away with them down the mountain.

Five miles farther up the road they came upon Primitivo, dashing after them in all haste, and he, too, turned about to go back with them.

A whole chapter might be employed in telling of that descent of the Rurales into the Plaza Abajo, and of the attack upon the bandits, for they were not disposed to give up without a fight, and their sentinels had warned them of the approach of enemies.

But everybody who knows Mexico, knows also that the Rurales are almost invincible; that they stop at nothing, and are daunted by nothing alive—and there could be but one end to the battle that ensued.

When it was over, out of the twenty-five men who had been there when Nick and the others made their escape from the valley, there were twelve prisoners only; but there were also three empty saddles among the dauntless Rurales.

The attack was made at daylight, and when the fight was over the men breakfasted.

Soon after that they started on the back trail, well satisfied with the work they had accomplished, for a dangerous band of bandits had been exterminated; one that might have grown presently to alarming proportions.

When they entered Morelia, Nick and Sanches rode side by side, but a courier had been sent on ahead to relieve the anxiety of those who awaited them, and many people came out to greet them, and to cheer as they entered the city.

That evening, when our friends were on the train, on their way back to Mexico, Nick dropped into the seat beside Primitivo, and he said to him:

"Primitivo, nothing has been said about the treasure that is hidden back there in the valley, and I would suggest that as soon as you think it wise, you return there with the proper outfit, and remove it, always remembering that half of it belongs to Eulalia."

"*Si, señor,*" replied Primitivo calmly. "I had been thinking of that. It has been there a great many years, and it will be safe until I go after it. Even if the houses were razed to the ground, the treasure-chamber would not be found."

"No. I think you are right about that."

"And what think you, Señor Carter, about the offer of Señor Chittenden, to care for Eulalia hereafter? Should I permit it?"

"I think so. Unless all signs fail, Hal will help him to care for her before very long."

* * * * * * *

The greeting given them upon their return to Coyocan by the señora, who had waited in the greatest anxiety, can better be imagined than described; and she went directly to the detective, and, seizing him by both hands, exclaimed:

"It is to you that we owe all our blessings, Mr. Carter."

"No, no," replied Nick. "You owe this one to Primitivo. Without him we should have been almost helpless."

THE END.

The next number (594) will contain "Eulalia, the Bandit Queen; or, Nick Carter's Chase Across the Mountains."

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TALKS WITH OUR READERS.

"Women do not disappear so much as men," said Mr. Hartley, of London, an international detective, who was interviewed in reference to a mysterious disappearance which is now attracting much public attention.

"When a woman goes it is usually a love-affair. Either the parents object to the man, or there is some other cause. And it is important to remember what cunning schemers women can be. Even quite young girls may be wonderfully clever in keeping things from their parents. During the course of my work I am very skeptical of women, for this reason. A girl might arrange for her lover or some one sent by him to meet her, and it would be a very simple matter for her to give her friends the slip in a crowded street. Of course, very often we get cases of sudden loss of memory happening to people who are in the best of health and spirits, but one rarely finds this occur to a young girl, and where the tendency does exist the family or friends usually know of it and keep watch accordingly. Again, it is possible a girl does not like the prospect of going home after she has been away for a holiday, and some one with whom she was in touch might assist her in carrying out a plan of her own.

"Disappearances are very common, not only in London, but in Paris and New York; but the public seldom hear of them. Not only girls, but old men and others disappear. Generally these are not cases of kidnaping; they had to do with family or business matters, and as the families as a rule did not wish the police to know the circumstances, they employed private detectives. Thus the outside world does not get to know of half of the disappearances and their causes.

"Crime sometimes enters into these sudden disappearances. A well-bended man of the world who has committed theft or felony either in business or private life will take it into his head to disappear and make a fresh start in life somewhere else. A few years ago a gentleman whose family was high in the social world vanished. He had been suspected of robbing his brother-in-law during a period of pressure in the latter's business. The victim knew that if he informed the police his brother-in-law would stand in danger of being prosecuted, so he handed the case over to me. It was proved that the man had actually been robbing him right and left, but for the sake of his wife he was allowed—and even assisted—to disappear.

"A husband walked out of his flat in Marylebone one day and was not heard of. His wife searched for three months herself, then came to me. She knew her husband could not have endured hardship or adventure, because he was physically unable to do much for himself. It was a troublesome case, but eventually I found the husband in a nursing-home. What had happened was that the man's parents were strict-living people, who did not go to the theater and did not drink stout. They did not think their son's wife—who did those things—was good enough for him, and they chose this means of getting him away from her."

In a manner which it would not be discreet to disclose, I became acquainted with one Jemmy, a London crook, who, on his own confession, had been a passer of counterfeit coins for years, and had never been "pinched" yet.

He was fairly well dressed, looking like a prosperous mechanic, and but for the shifty look in his eyes and the hard mouth, wasn't a bad-looking man.

Having assured himself through an intermediary that I was only a harmless journalist, and not a detective, he disclosed his method of working.

"I never have more than one dud on me at a time," he said, "and then, in case any nosing detective should want to run the rule over me, I could swear I got it in change somewhere. Not that I think any 'tec suspects me, as I have generally been a bit too wide for them."

"Well, where do you get your false coins from?" I asked.

Jemmy looked up at me and winked.

"I don't know who makes it," he said. "All I know is that by going to a certain public house in the East End, and being in there on a Monday morning at twelve o'clock exactly, I can buy as much as ever I want."

"Well, how do you do it?"

"All I have got to do is to send a post-card to that public house, and say I'll call for a parcel at, say, twelve o'clock the next day. A brown-paper parcel is handed over to me. I have a drink, and put down a sovereign, and a certain amount of change is given to me, according to the quantity of stuff that I have bought. Up I take my brown-paper parcel and clear off home."

"Rather risky, isn't it, both for you and the publican?"

"Oh, the publican! I don't worry about him; and as for myself—well, you've got to take risks in this business. Now, in that parcel very likely there will be twenty half-crowns and twenty florins. Sometimes the price varies. The half-crowns may have been turned out extra good, and then they will be priced to me at seventeen apiece; for a two-shilling-piece I give from fourpence to sixpence, though there was

one chap—he's dead now—who used to charge one-and-four-pence for a two-shilling-piece, so well were they made."

"Then where do you keep your store, and how do you dispose of it?"

"At one of the safe deposits—a guinea a year and your own safe. I've got a friend who helps me, and I pay him a salary to run risks. As I told you, I never have more than one dud on me. My pal keeps about eight or nine, and when I have passed one, he comes along, slips me one, and so we go on until the end of the day."

"And where do you pass them?"

"Small news-agents' and tobacconists' shops generally—especially where they are kept by women. I do it in the ordinary way of business, making a small purchase, and then finding I haven't got any small change. It nearly always comes off, and if the coin should be suspected, all I've got to do is to pull out two or three other florins and half-crowns—real ones—apologize, and offer, of course, to take the other one back. Some fellows get rid of a good deal of stuff on the race-course, but it is not much sport backing horses with bad half-crowns, for if you win you don't get much at that rate, and if you are found out you get half-killed. But, still, I know one bookmaker who'll always buy a good deal of stuff from me; he mixes it up in his silver-bag, and lands it out on the punters at Kempton Park."

"But you may be caught one of these days, and then it will mean five years for you."

"Five years? Pooh!" was the contemptuous answer. "They would never find out enough about me to get me three months!"

"And what's a good way to tell bad money?"

"Well, don't bother about biting the coin, or any of that nonsense—and some of the stuff is so good that it would take an expert to tell it by feeling the face of the coin. Just you run your thumb round the milling on the edge of the coin, and a child would be able to tell whether it's bad or not. So there you are, now. I've told you everything, and yet I am open to bet you a good shilling that it doesn't do my trade any harm!"

The oldest "life" convict in Sing Sing convict prison, Franz Hofmann, was lately pardoned after serving forty-seven years for murder, but he obstinately refused to leave his cell, because the world had progressed too much for him. Hofmann is the oldest convict in America, and perhaps in the world, in point of service. He was formerly a cigar-maker in Leipzig, Germany, and had only been in America four months, when, in August, 1860, he killed a friend in a Bowery drinking-resort.

During his long imprisonment Hofmann has acquired an excellent education, and can speak several languages, including English, although he knew nothing but German when he was sentenced. When he was taken to Sing Sing the first Japanese Embassy to visit America had arrived in Washington only two months previously; the Civil War had not yet begun. During the time he has been in prison three American Presidents have been assassinated, six great European wars have been fought, and two Western empires—Mexico and Brazil—have fallen.

When the Board of Pardons told Hofmann that he would be released, and asked him where he would like to go, Hofmann stared at them blankly, and replied with some displeasure that he wished to remain where he was. Although sixty-seven years of age, he is declared to be in perfect physical health, and he is, therefore, capable of making a living. When this fact was pointed out to him, Hofmann said the outside world had changed so much that he did not care to live in it, and that he would commit suicide unless he were allowed to remain in prison.

The authorities tempted him with alluring descriptions of the wonders of New York, and the warden even promised to escort him to that city and see him safely to a lodging-house, but Hofmann obstinately declined. He was very popular among the other prisoners, and they asked to be allowed to circulate a petition, praying for his retention in the prison in an "honorary" capacity.

UNDER FALSE COLORS.

BY J. A. HIGGINSON.

"A second mate wanted for Callao," shouted the door-keeper of the Sailors' Home, and on reaching the hall I was accosted by a somewhat fine-looking man.

"My second officer has been injured and sent to hospital," he said. "Will you join?"

"What ship, sir?"

"The *Golden Star;* she's in the river ready to sail."

"Yes," I replied, and soon afterward I was passing down New York harbor on board my new ship.

Everything indicated a prosperous voyage. A fast, well-found vessel was beneath my feet; but signs of approaching trouble soon appeared. The captain became so intoxicated that, at the end of a few days, his condition became alarming.

"Bear up and get advice," said I, while discussing with the chief mate our position.

"No," he returned thoughtfully, "for his certificate would be canceled. You must know that I am the captain's brother-in-law, and he owns the vessel. It has lately come to my knowledge that he has lost considerable sums, and has borrowed largely from a New York money-lender. Beware of the steward," the mate continued earnestly, "for he has supplanted one of ten years' honest service, and is here, I feel assured, for a questionable purpose. He has baffled all my intentions to keep the rum out of the ship, but I have placed one of the boys in the cabin ostensibly to assist, though really to watch and report to me what he witnesses there. I am determined to discover the truth, and save the skipper, if I can. Will you assist me?"

"Willingly," I said, greatly impressed by the straightforward behavior of the mate.

That night I was aroused by loud cries for help proceeding from the cabin, where I found the chief mate struggling desperately with the captain. A glance suf-

ficed to comprehend the situation, for the unhappy captain, in the agonies of delirium tremens, that Nemesis of the drunkard, fought with the fury of madness. Upon the deck the body of the insensible steward lay stretched, while several articles of furniture had already been destroyed.

"Look out, he's armed!" cried the mate, while striving to wrest from the captain a loaded revolver.

For a moment my intentions were checked, but, rushing forward, I seized the weapon and sought to wrench it away. The drink-maddened captain, at any time a powerful and dangerous foe, now seemed possessed of superhuman power. By an irresistible effort he tore himself free, and hurled us like helpless children across the desk. The rapid discharge of firearms followed. To longer remain in presence of such a foe would certainly prove fatal, so, rushing to the door, I escaped uninjured, and found the mate in the midst of the excited crew.

"Has the steward been shot?" I inquired.

"No; I saw him forcing the captain to drink, and I knocked the scoundrel down," he said.

It was now decided that while the men attracted the captain's attention toward the cabin door, the mate and I should enter his room and seize him from behind. We gained an entrance unobserved, but while the mate endeavored to seize a revolver that lay upon a table, he unfortunately disclosed himself in a mirror beside which the skipper was standing. The latter instantly wheeled round, but, dropping upon our knees, we escaped the shots that otherwise would have proved fatal, and, seizing his feet, we threw him upon the deck. A desperate struggle ensued. All three were locked in a deadly attempt to secure the still smoking weapon, but the sailors threw themselves upon their unhappy commander, and he was disarmed and secured.

Both captain and steward slowly recovered their senses, but for several days our youthful spy had nothing unusual to report.

One night, shortly after entering the northeast trades, I found the boy crouched beneath the shadow of the weather-rail.

"What is it?" I inquired cautiously.

"I've found the rum, sir," he whispered. "It is down in the after hold along with the beef and pork."

"Which side, boy?"

"Starboard, sir," he continued. "It's in the middle of a cask of biscuits, and I secured the key of the cabin hatch, so that you can chuck the stuff overboard."

Therenpon he handed over the article mentioned, and noiselessly disappeared.

I aroused the chief, and related to him the incident.

"Go down instantly," said he, leaping out of bed, "and capsize the liquor among the bilge-water. I shall watch in the cabin."

Not a sound, save the creaking of the timbers as the vessel rolled lightly on the placid sea, was heard as we noiselessly entered the cabin.

The cross-bar and hatch were carefully removed, and I then dropped on the casks below. Both port and starboard holds were carefully examined, but no such cask as the boy described was found. A sudden misgiving almost took my breath away, and the chief had evidently become impatient, for, leaning over the hatchway, he whispered:

"Can't you find——"

The glare of a lamp suddenly flashed in the aperture. A swiftly descending object struck his head, and before the sentence was finished, my companion, with a sickening thud, fell upon the casks beneath. Appalled by the occurrence, I stood immovable. A loud burst of laughter from the wily steward was followed by total darkness, as the hatch was replaced and securely fastened. In hastening to the assistance of my friend, my foot sank between two casks, and the injury sustained as I fell forward rendered me insensible. Upon recovery, I was still in total darkness, but happily discovered that nothing more serious than a sprained ankle attended the late mishap. The sound of angry voices was presently heard overheard.

"To sign away my ship?" cried the skipper.

"She wouldn't cover the loans," returned the steward, in a defiant tone.

"It's false—all advances are fully secured."

"Except this note," the steward replied. "What will you do about it?"

"What note?" shouted the captain, in great wrath.

"Listen. Six months after date I promise to pay Caleb Isaac the sum of Ten Thousand Dollars. Signed Thomas Bollard, master mariner."

"A forgery," yelled the infuriated skipper; "let me see it."

"When you've signed this," the other returned, as he rapped sharply on the cabin table.

A pause ensued. It was clear to me, now, why the steward had laid such a trap for us. He knew that, unless the mate was secured beforehand, he could never execute the nefarious scheme now being carried out overhead. He had evidently bribed or intimidated the youth to act as his tool; and now meant to secure his ends without delay.

My entire sympathy was aroused toward the captain, and with great anxiety his answer was awaited, but little did I conjecture what that really would be.

"Perhaps," said he, in so low and changed a tone that the words were with difficulty heard, "perhaps I *did* sign it, steward."

"I saw you," the other returned. "Well, now, captain," he continued, in a most conciliatory tone, "my brother is willing to return all your securities, and tear up this document, if you will sign this paper."

"And still leave me in command of the ship?" inquired the skipper calmly.

"Yes, sir, as long as I am with you."

The master rose from the table.

"I'll get the ink and sign it," he said.

He entered his room, and then returned to the cabin.

"Here's my signature," he shouted, "and if you stir I'll blow out your brains. Give me that forgery."

There was no response, and before I could realize the situation, the report of firearms was heard, and a heavy fall told that some one was hit. The sailors rushed below, the still insensible mate and I were released, while the skipper quietly obtained the document he deemed a forgery. Of the two injured men the chief mate received the most serious wounds, but, thanks to a robust constitution, he had entirely recovered his usual health by the time the ship reached Cape Horn. The steward was shot in the fleshy portion of his neck, with no worse result than a copious loss of blood, which apparently quite cowed him. He was allowed to resume duty, as his arrest would have disorganized the whole food department. Stormy Cape Horn was safely rounded, and the *Golden Star* sailed northward past the rock-bound Chilian headlands, and that island made famous by the immortal Robinson Crusoe, till she was fairly within the pleasant climate of the great Pacific Ocean.

One night, upon entering my room, a strange noise attracted my attention, but as every effort to trace its origin failed, I stepped on deck and informed the mate.

"What is it like?" he inquired.

"Rats; but I never heard so strange a noise," I said.

We entered the room quietly and listened.

"I don't hear anything," said the mate.

"Tchich! there it is again," I whispered, and my companion immediately placed his ear against the bulkhead. That did not appear satisfactory, so he knelt down and pressed his ear against the deck.

Squeak-weak, squeak-weak, was something like the sound now heard, or, rather, felt, by both watchers. I glanced curiously at the chief, who, motionless as a statue, still listened intently. Suddenly he rose to his knees, with face pale as death.

"Do you know what it means?" he asked.

"Not in the least," said I.

"It—it means," and then, seemingly unable to endure further delay, he rushed from the room.

I found him arousing the captain.

"Call all hands!" the latter whispered excitedly, and the crew were soon gathered round the cabin door.

"Remove the hatch," the captain ordered, and I then perceived that both lock and cross-bar of the hatchway through which the mate had been hurled were missing.

The demand was instantly obeyed, and, revolver in hand, the captain leaped through the aperture, closely followed by both his officers and several of the crew. What a sight met our astonished eyes! The mate turned upon the starboard hold the searching rays of a bull's-eye lamp, and there, like horribly hissing serpents, six jets of water leaped to the beams overhead. The *Golden Star* had been scuttled!

"The plugs, carpenter," shouted the captain, and these were immediately driven home, and the vessel saved from foundering.

Then a searching examination of the hold followed, and, like a tiger at bay, the steward was found hidden behind a large tank. With eyes gleaming with hatred, and a large knife raised above his head, the would-be murderer sprang toward the mate.

"You'll not escape me now," he cried.

The chief mate stepped hurriedly backward, and, losing his footing, fell upon the casks. He was now entirely at the mercy of his foe, whose upraised knife was descending, when the sharp report of firearms rang out, and the steward, mortally wounded, rolled over on his side.

"You bear me witness that he brought it on himself," the captain exclaimed.

"Aye, aye, sir," we replied.

"You have saved my life, captain," the mate said, while advancing with outstretched hand.

"And you my ship," the skipper returned, grasping the hand of his trusty relative. "I am deeply sorry for what has previously occurred," he continued; "but those land-sharks had almost ruined me, and I knew not what I did."

The dying steward was removed to the deck.

"That bill is a forgery, captain," he said; "my brother did it. Write it all down, sir, and I'll sign the paper before I die. He knew that the ship was not insured, but he has also forged your name upon policies for double her value, and given strict orders that she should be scuttled if I failed to obtain your signature to a deed of transfer. I have failed, and I'm glad of it now; but I was also in his power, and was forced to act as I did. Let me sign that, sir. So. Good-by, all, and may God forgive my sins."

He sank back exhausted, and remained unconscious for some time, but just as the sun sank below the western sea he died, and was buried that night.

Northward, ho! On sped the *Golden Star*, until the cry, "Land, O," rang from aloft, and the snow-capped summits of the lofty Andes looked down upon the tiny white speck that floated on the bosom of the great Pacific.

"Stations," sang out the Captain, as the northern end of San Lorenzo Island was passed, and the anchor was at length dropped in the spacious harbor of Callao.

* * * * * * *

Upon returning to New York, the affairs of the captain were placed in the hands of a respectable lawyer, the result being that, to avoid exposure, the wily usurer disgorged his ill-gotten gains, and the captain became a stanch teetotaler under the influence of the mate's advice. No kinder-hearted, more trusty skipper than he is now ever sailed the sea. It was drink that had all but ruined him, as it has ruined so many.

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